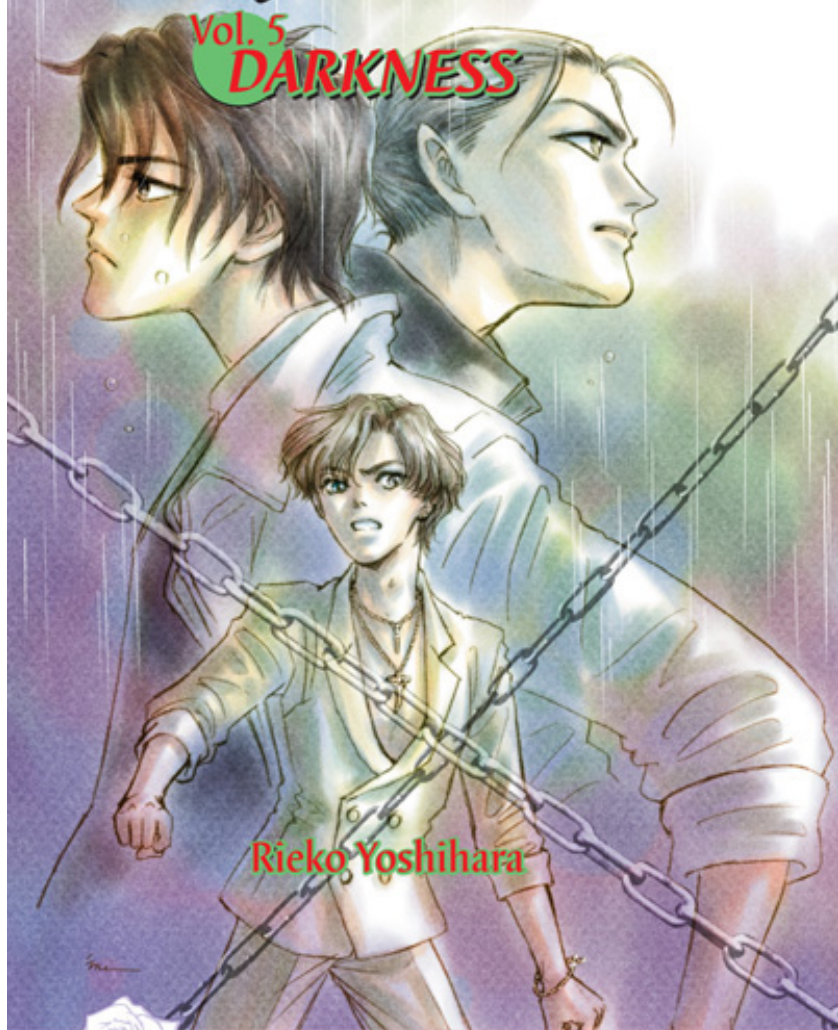


Ai No Kusabi

The Space Between

Vol. 5

DARKNESS



Rieko Yoshihara



Yaoi  Novel

Ai No Kusabi ***The Space Between***

Vol. 5
DARKNESS

Written by
RIEKO YOSHIHARA

Illustrations by
KATSUMI MICHIHARA

English translation by
Kelly Quine

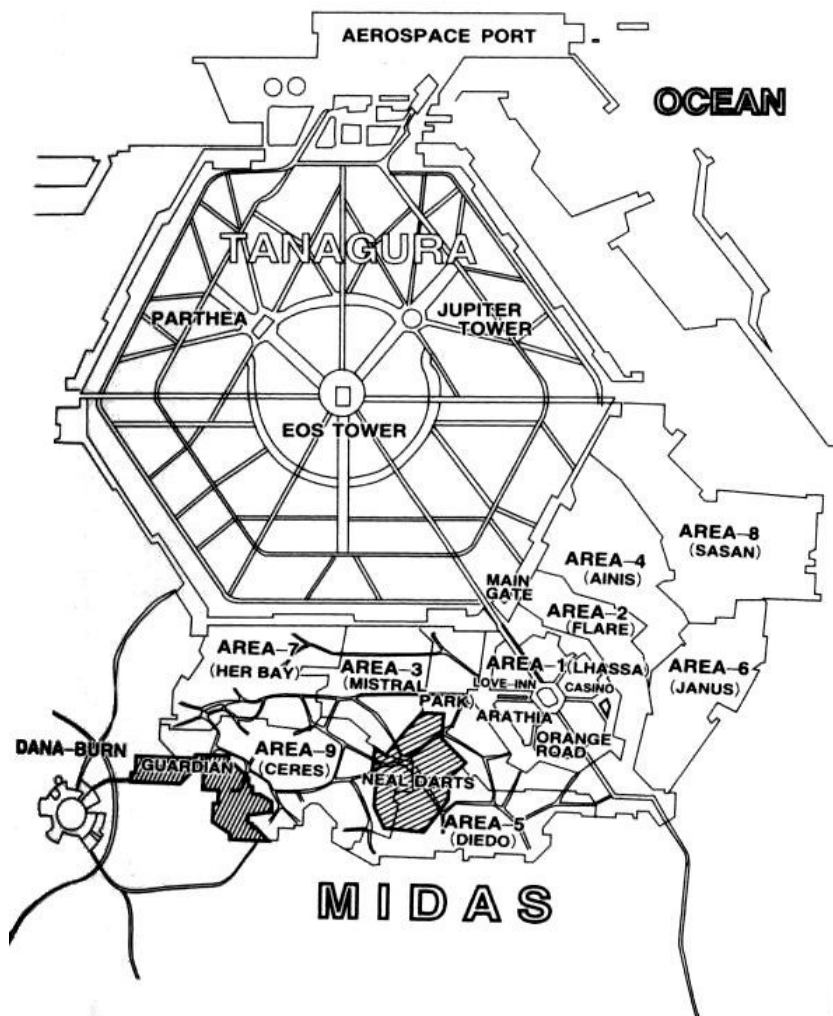


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Prologue

Midas. Area 9. Ceres.

The slums. Within reach of the huge pleasure town of Midas, but not part of it. A ghost city nestled within the endless blissful quarters, though not found on any official map. Despised by the good citizens of Midas, held in contempt and derision, its existence was never mentioned except with scornful laughter.

The Tanagura government that ruled the planetary system of Amoy did not issue official ID cards to anyone who dwelt in the slums. That alone was enough to consign them to the shadows—to permanent estrangement and neglect.

Which was why, unlike those who lived in Midas, they were not constrained by the rigid class system known as "Zein."

No slum-dweller celebrated that privilege. The freedom of the slums was no different from the freedom of a caged bird—with no place to flee and no place to escape the stifling oppression.

The unhinged brutality of overabundant youth birthed rack and ruin, which ultimately bred lethargy and lassitude. The warped, males-only demographic of the Colony, incapable of reproducing their own kind, festered in that permanent state.

"Mongrels," they denigrated themselves.

But one day inexorably followed the next. The mongrels asked nothing of why they were there or why they even existed. The rain fell on the just and the unjust alike. The high and the low. And so without debate, seeking no excuses, they swallowed their delight and anger, sorrow and pleasure, and accepted things as they stood.

Chapter 1

It was raining. A hard, cold, penetrating rain. Thanks to the overhanging shop awnings, Riki wasn't getting soaked. But simply standing there was enough for the cold to seep through his shoes, wrapping its tendrils around his limbs and licking its cold tongue against his bones as it crept up his spine.

Standing on a corner in the shopping district, Riki sucked on a cigarette and shivered as he took in the lit night streets. It was like he was searching for something and didn't wish to overlook anything caught up in the swirl of humanity. He didn't move an inch, as if he'd forgotten even how to blink.

As was to be expected, considering the continuing, pervasive cold at that time of night, Riki's usual light coat had been replaced with an all-weather, metallic blue motorcycle jacket over a Gorgon wool turtleneck. Hardly atypical for the slums, he could even be considered underdressed—and compared to the typical Midas riches, he was very plain.

But no matter how Riki clothed himself, his unique presence ran counter to the humdrum human tide. Under the wan glow of the streetlights and behind the curtain of falling rain, Riki became a part of the nightscape itself, a distinct presence that would not be buried beneath the smoky darkness.

Passers-by cast curious looks at him as they drew near. They murmured obviously among themselves and exchanged meaningful whispers at a distance. Some of the hot, longing stares were suffused with something far stronger.

However entranced, even hesitating in their tracks, nobody sidled up to Riki. Along with Riki's face and name, word of his reputation and the rumors of his battles had bubbled up from the slums.

The once and future leader of Bison loitering, as if waiting for somebody—at that time of night, in that kind of place, and alone—had to mean something.

That was enough to attract more than the usual amount of curiosity and concern. But that didn't mean any of them were going to do anything more than indulge in a private, passing glance.

Among the gangs struggling for territory, Bison's name was buzzing. They had ruled the slums until suddenly quitting the field and breaking up. Ever since, Bison had become a ghostly presence, a living legend. Five years had passed, but Bison's reputation was still a force to be reckoned with.

Bison was a sleeping dog everybody knew to leave alone. The Jeeks incident cemented that truth. In a flash, the frantic chatter reached far and wide, into every crack and cranny.

It deserved to go the way of all boastings served up in bars behind other people's backs—with a sneer and a pointed finger. But not really knowing for certain the broad repercussions, some minefields were better left alone.

Impudence and ignorance—nobody was about to pipe up and clearly elucidate the hazy borderline between the two as a public service. The fate of Jeeks and the Hyper Kids stood as a lesson for everyone—that was what happened to upstarts foolish enough to trash the unwritten laws of the slums.

Among the endlessly quarreling young men in the oppressive, suffocating slums, their jargon identified three types of men worthy of particular ridicule: a *Tito* was a lap dog only good at cozing up to strangers; a *Borg* was a junkyard dog with all bark and no bite; a *Knox* was a scrapper who hit anybody and anything that got too close.

But a *Cocker*—who returned to the slums defeated, his tail between his legs—was singled out in particular.

Being called a beaten dog hardly fazed Riki in the slightest. But the Jeeks incident had led to him baring his fangs, and he'd revealed them to be as razor-sharp as they'd ever been. The proof unexpectedly out there in the open, everybody suddenly experienced a change of heart. Not for the better, and not for the worse.

Riki didn't care about anybody's expectations of him. But that day, in the rain, he was bothered that things were running well behind schedule.

Ten more minutes. For old times' sake. *five more minutes.*

The minutes slowly ticked away.

He's going to stand me up?

Unwilling to accept the possibility, Riki stayed where he was. Guy had proposed to meet him there. "Been a while," Guy said, "Let's get together for drinks at Aden's."

Riki had agreed.

Caught up in Kirie's conspiracies—no, dangled as bait to lure Riki back into Iason's clutches—Guy had ended up trapped for two weeks before being released. Ever since then, things between Riki and Guy had been stiff and unnatural. Things that couldn't be put into words. But there was a subtle sense of separation they could both feel. It was a gap that couldn't be crossed.

"Tie up your loose ends as best you can," Iason had told Riki. "When you come back to Eos, I don't want any dirt of the slums clinging to your shoes. Close the door on any future troubles."

Iason had foreseen the rift growing between Riki and Guy. The date and time of Riki's return to Eos was not set in stone. But there was no delaying the inevitable, and Iason would not tolerate things dragging out for very long.

Once again, in the middle of the night, in the midst of that intense entanglement, Riki had solicited Iason's sexual attentions. Once again he'd donned the chains of a pet. He had to deal with that fact. Even though no other choices had been left to him, that hunger and thirst brought home to him the steep cost of freedom.

However, as much as he disdained lingering farewells, he didn't want to leave with that awkwardness still lingering between himself and Guy. A thing once cast aside could not be taken up again. In his head, he knew it was all inevitable and nonnegotiable. But his

emotions betrayed his rationality.



Or, rather, precisely because it was a thing he'd once cast aside, he knew he'd never be given the opportunity to make that mistake again. That was probably why he'd come back to the slums. But the stark reality right before his eyes had not hesitated to tear him apart.

He'd intended to stretch his limbs and backfill those three missing years. But after just one year, that precious freedom in his grasp had turned to dust.

Why? How had this happened? Had it been in the cards all along? With that thought alone, the bile grew all the more bitter at the back of his throat. He gritted his teeth. *A little late for thinking of this now*, he thought derisively.

Guy wasn't coming. What was the point in waiting longer? He crushed out his cigarette against the wall and flicked it away with the tips of his fingers before trudging off, impervious to the soaking rain. The raindrops dancing and spattering around his feet grew heavier. It didn't look like the rain would be stopping anytime soon.

Chapter 2

In the darkness, a purple haze coiled beneath the few spots of bright light. Most had a drink in one hand, a cigarette in the other. There was talk in a familiar bar with the sounds of raucous laughter mingling with occasional shouts of rage.

Guy, Luke, Sid, and Norris—the original members of Bison were hanging out in the back booth more or less reserved for them, nibbling at a few side dishes as the bottles accumulated.

It wasn't like anybody had ever formally proposed the arrangement. But if nothing particularly pressing was at hand, that was where they went to eat and hang out. Though the best they could hope for was a snack, not a full meal.

The only predetermined rule was that when the party began, nobody took roll. Nobody touched base beforehand or called to cancel. These were the unspoken rules that had evolved since Riki left the slums. They hadn't changed when he came back. But that night as well, Riki was nowhere to be seen.

"Like I was asking, what's this talk about all of a sudden?"

Though night had barely fallen, Norris was in an oddly garrulous mood.

"A stranger could read you like a book," Sid said with a knowing look.

"You mean, me looking to pair up?" Norris gripped the glass and furrowed his eyebrows.

Norris always managed to keep his spirits up, even with a little alcohol in him. That night, though, the booze had turned him into a miserable drunk. The question of what to do with the rest of his life weighed heavily on his shoulders: would he settle down into a partnership, or just leave it as sex friends?

"Things going OK between you and Maxi?"

"In their own way, I suppose."

"As lovey-dovey as always?" kidded Luke, chomping down on his dry, synthetic excuse for a steak.

"Hardly," Norris said, pursing his lips sourly. *Don't go around asking stupid questions*, he meant.

"Obviously must be Maxi."

"Forget about the lovey-dovey business. He's all, 'Just shut up and get your butt over here!'"

As far as his old Bison mates knew, Norris struck a player's pose, on the make with every bit of snatch that crossed his path. But he was, in fact, fastidiously selective about his bedmates, and the focus of his sex life was currently a hard-edged junkyard demo man ten years his senior. When that became known, they were all equally amazed, though each in his own way.

"When did Norris get so damned whipped?"

"Who knew his tastes ran in that direction?"

"Huh. The fellow must be putting on some moves as well."

Though one of the gang, they didn't inquire too deeply into Norris's love life. That was beneath them. The fact that Maxi was a bad-ass type hauling around his fair share of battle scars was the only reason it made a dent in the background noise.

While it was just a budding romance, Norris didn't hesitate to call the relationship necessary. He couldn't live with it, but he couldn't live without it, either.

Maxi was a junkyard demo man. He could take anything apart, including the stuff a person didn't come by legally. Considering that he likely got a lot of requests that weren't on the up and up, his unconscious instincts would be to suspect the worst. He was the kind of man who didn't have the time to play the field, and instead, stayed holed up in his workplace with something to keep his hands busy.

These still waters ran deep. He had the skills. When he took on a job, he did it right. He repaired, maintained, and kept in stock whatever was usable. Whatever could be recycled was sent on, and the waste crushed and disposed of.

Maxi was a one-man band with one song in the repertoire. But manual labor that came down to a contest of physical strength made his tugged exterior something more than mere bodybuilding muscularity.

With his tall, rough and rugged stature and perpetual five o'clock shadow, Maxi cut a strapping figure that suited him well. When it came to what passed for strength and sexual appeal in the slums, his was a coveted package of "maleness" trailing pheromones in his wake.

Not to mention that he was never short for cash.

That being the case, many went trolling for him, not as a mere sex friend but with the intent of "marrying into money." It was said, however, that he was a bit of an eccentric. Since Norris didn't deny that, there was likely some truth to the rumors.

Still, having stayed in the relationship for a number of years now, it wasn't hard to imagine that there was more going on there than the necessity Norris complained about.

"And?" Sid asked, saying what was perhaps better left unsaid. "What the hell is there for you to balk about?"

Sid couldn't understand what was keeping Norris from taking the next step and sealing the deal.

Run-of-the mill punks weren't fit to hold Maxi's sword. Not to mention that the man scared the living shit out of just about everybody else. But Norris had possessed the strength to make it as an original member of Bison.

Although the physical differences between Maxi and other men could probably overwhelm most potential lovers, Norris seemed unbothered. Plus, they seemed to get along in bed as well.

The junkman was self-made and self-reliant. He belonged to that small group of real winners in the slums. Getting asked to pair up with a guy like that didn't need to be asked twice. It was plain common sense as far as Sid was concerned.

"What are you fishing for?"

"What's holding you back, man?"

"Well—ah—how should I put this..." For all the bitching and barking Norris had been doing up to that point, now he clammed up.

"Don't tell me you've got someone else on the side—"

"No."

"Didn't think so. Fact is, you're crazy about Maxi."

"Am not," Norris said, quickly making it clear what was what. "*He's* crazy about me."

"Oh, of course."

"So what's it to you?" Norris asked.

"You're saying that Maxi—"

"He wouldn't be wanting you to cut your ties with us?" Guy asked, intending the query as a joke. But Norris scowled quite expressively.

"You lie!"

"Holy shit—"

Sid and Luke started and yelped at the same time. Ignoring the outburst, Guy breathed an enigmatic sigh. Bull's eye. And he hadn't even been aiming at the target.

If forced to choose between friends who were as good as family and a lover, Norris would have a hard time of it. On the other hand,

perhaps he really did have a thing for Maxi, and that wasn't something he wanted to admit to his friends.

"What's the big deal?" Luke asked with a crooked smile. "So it turns out Maxi's the possessive type as well. Really thought that cool, hard front was more than skin-deep. But I guess not."

"Yeah. Like, *what the hell are you bringing this up now for?* That kind of feeling." Norris drained his glass in a gesture of more than mere chagrin.

Ever since the Jeeks incident, the inevitable smoldering calls for Bison's resurrection were treated by Guy and the others as nothing. But the way Maxi saw things—since he wanted to settle down and get serious with Norris—it presented a reality he couldn't ignore.

In matters of sex, the slums were said to impose no restrictions and no morals. All the more reason that seriously pairing up was not something taken lightly. Those who wanted sex for the fun of it could pick up a partner anywhere, as long as the expectations were kept low.

But pairing up was different. Harboring a desire so intense a guy would be willing to crawl across broken glass didn't mean he'd get what he wanted. Choosing meant nothing without being chosen.

Time had to be taken, and things thought through. A guy looking to pair up had to determine that his partner held the same values that he held so the decision would arouse no regrets later.

When formally becoming pairing partners, that binding right could be sought out. But if Maxi wasn't pressing Norris to come to a decision, it meant Maxi wasn't imposing his feelings on him and probably intended to respect Norris's own thoughts about the matter right up to the end.

Huh. Maxi must really love this guy.

The thought unexpectedly warmed Guy's heart. Knowing that his friends had reasons to live for themselves pleased him as if it were his own achievement. Despite their teasing and bullshitting, Sid and

Luke doubtlessly shared the same feelings.

Yeah, Maxi is the older man, and not just in years. Maxi had to be big man in more ways than one to respect his partner's wishes. On the other hand, though, he could believe that Maxi wanted Norris to choose *him*.

It seemed a stretch that a man's man like Maxi would hem and haw over such a serious matter. Though he might want to determine what Bison meant to Norris—or, rather, whether Norris valued his own existence over Bison.

Maxi would have been willing to give and take as long as things stayed the way they had been since Bison had retired from the scene. But then Riki returned to the slums. He wasn't the same species of beaten dog as the others. Something about him had matured, suffusing him with an aura of the sublime.

And that made Maxi all the more anxious and impatient—though perhaps not so much *impatient* as *uncertain*. Norris had been cooling off and settling down, but now he seemed to be slipping back into his old ways and even Guy couldn't laugh off these concerns as needless anxiety.

Though the name of Bison was more legend than reality, its reach was now greater than ever before. Such that its original members, who still could be said to have some skin left in the game, from time to time got sick and tired of nothing ever happening. Riki's return only spurred those feelings on. And the pounding they delivered to Jeeks very much lit the fire anew.

The so-called second coining of Bison was a fool's dream. But in a different sense, Guy and the others had reasons to believe it could happen. Just having Riki back by their sides was enough to strengthen that belief.

Maxi must have figured out that much. Which was why he wanted Norris to make a choice.

Norris mumbled half to himself, "Fine with me if he wants to pair up. But..." From his perspective, either way he'd end up having to

choose one over the other.

"When you put it that way, sounds like you expect to wake up wrapped in chains with the life choked out of you."

"The old man may be getting up there, but Maxi sure looks like he's still got it together."

Maxi would be rolling his eyes if he knew that at thirty-two he counted as an "old man." But a decade made a hefty generation gap in the slums. Enough of one that the bunch of boys—all younger than fifteen—whom Jeeks had ganged together well deserved the name "Hyper Kids."

Even for Guy and the rest, barely in their twenties, these kids were totally out of control. Though they remained unconscious of the fact that when Bison had started up, with Riki fresh out of Guardian and leading the pack, their elders had thought the same thing.

And if it had ever been brought to their attention, they would have objected with one voice. *Those punks are so far out of our league it ain't fucking funny.*

"Luke, if I was you, I'd be careful of something jumping out of the darkness and sticking you like a pig."

"I'm the one who keeps things crystal clear from the very start."

The big-mouthing Luke was generally recognized as a "virgin stalker." It was rumored he hunted only for the thrill of the kill and tended to end things rather badly, not wanting to get into a relationship. Most of those rumors came from the envy of those who had no talent for cruising fresh meat.

"But if Maxi is eager, won't it make things kinda chancy?"

"I'm saying quit worrying about it. Quit making up stories," Norris said, and after a while, they grew tired of poking fun at his troubles. The table slipped into silence, interrupted only by an occasional heavy sigh.

The slow, sluggish river of time passed by in the bar. Only Guy paid

particular attention to his watch.

"What's up, Guy?" Luke asked with a wan smile. "Got a date? Better get a move on, then. Don't feel obligated to hang around with the likes of us."

There was a reason for his two-week absence, but he hadn't gone out of his way to offer any explanations. It was obvious, though, that they all put it down to troubles with his love life. With Guy, who had no intention of affecting impotence or an embarrassing perversion, it was best to avoid any nosy inquiries into the matter.

No way was he letting it be known he'd been tricked by Kirie and sold to some Tanagura elite. If they ever found out, the old Bison gang would react with either surprise or disdain. Either way, he wouldn't have much of a reputation anymore.

However, he couldn't avoid feeling that things between Riki and him had consequently grown that much more complicated.

Hell. He sighed despite himself.

"Yeah, yeah. We're not such unrefined slobs, you know?" Norris spoke as if to imply he'd already made up his mind about whom the date was with.

And, well, given the one person clearly missing from their gathering, the subject itself seemed well beyond its expiration date. Sid remained silent and drained his glass. *Just fucking settle it*, he said with his eyes, as if in reproof.

The awkwardness of the current state of affairs was such that there'd be no burying the hatchet if one of them didn't cave. As far as these old gang members were concerned, it was up to Guy to see to it that things got resolved.

Guy didn't deny it.

In any case, the problem reached back to before that night, anyway. Guy had already taken it upon himself to sort things out with Riki. It was only ten more minutes until the appointed hour.

"Sorry, but I've got to get going." He got sluggishly to his feet.

"Take it easy."

"Get yourself good and soaked. It'll give you a reason to stick around while things dry off. You won't regret it in the morning."

But Guy knew he couldn't get over it the way Luke suggested. His concerns ran deeper. The hickeys on Riki's neck. His listless mood. More than an awkward moment following lovemaking. These moments struck Guy as something like an owner planting "No Trespassing" signs all over his property. It made his throat ache.

I'm acting just like an idiot.

Guy bit down hard on his bottom lip. But he could do nothing to quell the bitter taste in his mouth. It didn't matter though—a moment later, forewarned only by an ominous creaking sound, the barroom door violently crashed open.

Stunned, everyone froze in surprise. They turned and looked as one. *What the hell is going on?* The murmurs rose and then died.

A phalanx of armed men, dressed all in black, burst through the door.

Breaths were drawn in shock, as if all occupants of the bar had been doused with ice water.

"*Nobody move!*" The harsh warning rang out, further transfixing them. "Don't try anything stupid!"

None of them could grasp what was happening before their eyes. Their confused thoughts rejected the reality right in front of them. Still, confronted by a military squad and the laser sights of weapons, no matter how taken aback they might be, they realized just as quickly the pointlessness of howling at this threat.

Despite all the trappings of some impromptu sideshow, they knew at a glance it wasn't some sort of prank or practical joke. They quickly sobered up and cooled down.

It wasn't the Ceres security detail. So who the hell were they? What were they doing there? Incomprehension and shock short-circuited the thoughts of the onlookers.

The bar fell completely silent. From behind the armed human wall, several men wearing long rain coats stepped forward while twirling compact, silver nightsticks.

In the frozen stillness, the bar's patrons blanched, feeling a chill run down their backs. Nobody knew the official name for those nightsticks. Not even those who'd been given the opportunity to see them up close. Throughout the slums they were known as "shock eyes."

A mere twenty centimeters in length, when the tip came in contact with the skin, the electric jolt delivered felt like sparks coursing out of the eyeballs. And that was the lowest setting. It could drop the toughest, strongest man to his knees.

Those unlucky enough to personally experience it—typically a mongrel who had gotten stupid and screwed up in Midas—ended up in a half-dead heap.

The official name for the thing didn't matter much, but not knowing its power and what it could do to a man did. The people who carried them, however, were known in the slums.

The Midas Division of Public Safety.

Knowing whom the armed military squad represented, the wordless fear tightened its fingers around the bar occupants' throats.

What the fuck are Midas cops doing here?

Packing heat was strictly forbidden in the playgrounds and pleasure quarters that comprised Midas. But there were always exceptions to be made, no matter what the nature of the society. It was the same in Midas.

The job of the Midas police was to ensure the safety and well-being of the citizens and tourists. They were comprised of beat cops dressed in silver-gray uniforms, the secret service details that

guarded VIPs, and the black-clad security guards infamously known as the "Darkmen."

Reviled throughout the slums, the Darkmen were hardly devoted to the cause of justice. They were the flip side of the rule of law, spreading fear in secret. The word was that by simply flashing their shock eyes, any brawl dissipated on the spot.

However, up until now, no Midas cop had ever set foot in the slums. The reason being that every citizen of Midas had the PAM device. It was affixed to the left earlobe of men and the right earlobe of women. The biochip also restricted the range of their movements, keeping them contained within an invisible electric fence.

Midas police were not exempted.

Besides, unlike the perversely tenacious Vigilante Corps, who seemed obsessed with hunting down and exterminating the slum insects who nibbled at their extremities, the beat cops and the Darkmen didn't have the time to bother chasing the small fry when they ran back to their dens. It wasn't worth it.

The residents of the slums knew of no special backdoor arrangements. The Vigilante Corps and the cops in general simply could not cross the line. The slums were located in an autonomously governed region, and Ceres was the septic tank of Midas. The two regarded each other as snakes and scorpions.

That was what they all believed. None of them were foolish enough to believe that any sense of kinship could exist in the same space as such deep loathing.

Hence, it was an itch the slums couldn't stop scratching. No matter how they craved and thirsted, Midas embodied everything that would never be theirs.

Area 9 had been erased in its entirety from the official maps of Midas. But it was still there, and would be until the end of time. That made the boundaries invisible lines drawn in the air.

Contempt and enmity. Jealousy and envy. They were the obvious

feelings that attended the one-way flow of human beings between Midas and the slums.

Until today.

Cops who never would have ventured into the slums had come there under force of arms. A lifetime of theories and beliefs were shattered overnight. For the young kids, unable to bear the stifling atmosphere of the slums and cruising Midas for thrills and profit, that realization came as a double shock.

If a guy got into deep shit cruising, he could always run back to the safety of Ceres. But that strategy was suddenly flawed with the police storming in, dressed in full military regalia.

The gang warfare that broke out on a daily basis was more a way to dissipate the manic, chronic sense of strain. Like a particularly brutal version of capture the flag confined to defined territories. Even if someone was wielding an iron pipe fashioned into a truncheon, nobody ever broke out the heavy weapons and started shooting.

An arms ban was one of the conditions Ceres had agreed to when seeking recognition of its independence from Tanagura, and the powers that be in Ceres enforced it with an iron hand. Even if they wanted to illicitly manufacture firearms in Ceres, nobody had the necessary skills or financial resources.

It was no exaggeration to say that Midas only tolerated the ghost city of Ceres *because* gun control in the slums was so thorough.

It was a warped world with no place to run and no place to hide. Young men enjoyed the most corrupt kind of freedom. There was no escaping the festering, suffocating sense of claustrophobia.

Their greatest fear, in fact, was not Midas, but Tanagura. And that fear as well slipped from their thoughts, swept away on the listless tide of the endless, numbing days.

As an autonomous region, whatever recognition Ceres was granted was as a subdivision of Midas. Erasing Ceres from the map did not

erase that reality. They would always be the undead Ceres, forever under Tanagura's watchful eye. That unspoken truth, though, was never made official.

Consequently, the residents of the slums thought of themselves as a world apart from Tanagura, with no connection to it whatsoever. While allowed to cruise Midas, they could not pass through the gates of Tanagura. At least *that* particular reality could not be denied.

The desire to wreak destruction on Midas—and any anarchist instincts as well—died at birth. In that light, Jeeks flaunting the common sense of the slums and torching the old Bison safe house was over the top and out of control.

Ceres was Midas's landfill and compost heap. It existed only to feed the scorn of the Midas citizenry as well as their sense of superiority. That was no metaphor nor any sardonic attempt at wit. It was the harsh truth. The unalterable facts on the ground. Nevertheless, not one of them now grasped the true nature of the situation right before his eyes.

Knowing that it was no simulation and not a game, they were still left to ask themselves, *What are they doing here? And what the hell is going on?*

Eyes wide, voices swallowed, breaths held, reality whiplashed their emotions and strained their thoughts.

"Where's Kirie?" demanded the leader of the Darkmen. His cold, contemptuous gaze scanned the room. Before any of them could begin to speak, the force in his equally cold voice seemed to grip them in freezing, steel claws.

A slight murmur ran through the bar. So that was the reason these Midas "peace officers" had deigned to visit their little corner of the world, causing the utterly surprising mess that now tightened like a noose around their necks.

Knowing it was *Kirie* slightly alleviated the fear and trembling.

In such an incomprehensible situation, chills running up and down the spine were by themselves enough to crank up the inexplicable strain. Having some grasp of the cause, they could in a small way get a handle on the situation.

At the same time, though, with the guns pointed at them and the Darkmen staring them down, there was no way they could begin to actually relax.

"Where is this odd-eyed Kirie?" the Darkman asked a second time.

The silence stirred slightly, but did not break. Just as the residents of the slums were estranged from the actual state of affairs in Midas, and had no real comprehension of its politics or organization, the slums were similarly mysterious to the Darkmen.

They simply had no reason to know. As far as the Midas Division of Public Safety was concerned, the slum mongrels were lower in their estimation than pond scum.

The scorn and contempt in which the people of Midas held the slum dwellers was deeply ingrained, practically genetic. The stoic Darkmen, who kept a tight rein on their emotions, were no exception.

As far as the Darkmen were concerned, they'd come there that night only because they'd been ordered to. Never in their lives would they have imagined having any cause to step into that detestable septic tank.

They'd only been given Kirie's mug shot and profile and told to bring him in for questioning. Nothing more. Still, given those orders, they executed them with all due haste. Their pride and dignity as Darkmen demanded nothing less.

Their leader spoke in a low, intimidating voice. "We have reason to believe that Kirie frequents this establishment. Any attempt to hide him would not be a good idea."

Having come that far, they had no intention of leaving empty-handed. The glint in the Darkman's eyes communicated far more

eloquently what he didn't have to say out loud.

"Where is he?"

The tense, controlled emotions in his voice. The cold look in his eyes. Turn over that rock and the raw ferocity cloaked by the icy darkness of the night might suddenly appear. Like a frigid fist grabbing the entrails.

And they all knew that the cycles of gang warfare suffusing the slums—the only ready outlet for all their accumulated frustrations—was a completely different animal.

The man's hard gaze left them all with the impression of a cruel child about to pull the wings off a fly. They swallowed hard and stared at the floor, as if to say: *This has nothing to do with me.*

Paralyzed, unable to fight or flee, with taut faces they pointed their eyes at the table where Guy and the gang were sitting. Honor among thieves, the defiant spirit, and backbone all wilted there on the spot.

In front of the Midas Darkmen wielding their shock eyes, the mongrels didn't want to appear as cowards selling out their friends. But at that moment in time, such willpower and courage had vanished. The overriding desire to be rid of these heavily armed officers and their piercing stares—that instinctual fear—won out.

But maybe Bison could ride the wave out by themselves? Surely the gang that buried Jeeks could at least fight these Darkmen to a draw? Such wishes and expectations undoubtedly flitted through the heads of the onlookers.

Of course, they harbored such speculations only to the extent that they were guaranteed to look on from the grandstands. In any case, they had to come up with some sacrificial lamb to toss to the wolves. And it wasn't going to be them.

They didn't know Kirie well enough to justify taking on the burden. Their eyes were clouded by pure self-interest. With all their hearts, they wished to bend reality to whatever ends served them best. And

not one of them would blame himself or be ashamed for doing so.

Suddenly finding themselves dragged to the fore, Guy and the others were far from surprised. Once again, Kirie had screwed them over.

Guy ground his back molars.

Why the fuck are we in the crosshairs?

That shit with Jeeks was bad enough. Then there was the pet business, and his two weeks in house arrest on top of that. Guy was just beginning to believe he was free and clear when his relationship with Riki hit the skids. And now a platoon of Midas Darkmen were piling into his life.

This ain't funny anymore.

Kirie was a curse to everyone he touched.

What did the little bastard do this time?

Whatever he had done, it couldn't have come at a worse time.

No one said anything, but the rest were regretting it now as well and steeled their resolve. They were no match for the Darkmen when it came to kicking organized ass. But when it came to sheer pandemonium and carnage, Bison could boast weathering a few storms of their own.

Still, watching the Darkmen close in on them with relaxed steps, they knew these guys only played for keeps.

Shit. These guys are serious.

What do we do now?

They couldn't help becoming aware of a kind of fear they hadn't tasted until now racing through their bodies.

"Where's this Kirie?" asked the Darkmen leader, stopping to fix a target in his sights. His eyes turned to Luke. From the get-go, Luke

felt no obligation to cover for Kirie, so he wasn't going to put on any showy display of defiance in front of the Darkmen.

"Kirie hasn't show up here," he stated with carefree abandon, yet there was a slight tremble in his voice that he couldn't hide. "So there's no way we're gonna know where that asshole is!"



For a long moment, the two glared at each other. A moment later,

the man unsparingly slammed the metal bar against Luke. As if thrown by a small explosion, Luke was knocked sideways and toppled off his seat to the floor. The onlookers gulped and a stir went through the crowd.

The man—his face expressionless—planted his boot on Luke's stomach. Luke writhed and moaned on the floor. The pain seemed to spread through the room, creating a collective groan.

Acrid breath whistled out of Luke's throat and he fainted.

Hardly stirring an eyebrow, the man selected Norris as his next target and posed the same question. "Where's Kirie?"

"He ain't lying!" The tension in Norris's face and voice resulted from the unprovoked assault on Luke. "Ever since he came into some money, he doesn't show his face around here."

It was the truth, whether the man believed Norris or not. There was nothing else Norris could say. Even if he wanted to stay on the good side of the Darkmen, he couldn't give what he didn't have.

The man dispassionately drove the tip of his boot into Norris's gut, making Norris gurgle and double over onto the table.

Having observed Luke and Norris tortured in succession, almost instinctually, Sid leapt from his seat and shouted, "We're telling you, we don't know!"

But an instant later, before the next words could emerge from his mouth, the whites of Sid's eyes flashed and he keeled over. All in the snap of a finger. Sid himself probably hadn't even realized what had happened.

As far as the onlookers were concerned, holding their breaths as they watched the scene unfold, something entirely mysterious had occurred.

Then with a sharp, grating, metallic sound, the nightstick in the man's hand—having expanded several times in length—returned to its normal size. And they all realized that the shock eye was responsible.

They hadn't really believed it until then. The true power of a Darkman's telescopic nightstick had been demonstrated before their eyes and a hitherto unknown fear shook them to the core.

"I don't much care if he never shows his face here. What I want to know is where he is!"

The man's cold stare hit Guy and Guy swallowed hard. Though for all practical purposes, Bison no longer existed, Guy still shouldered his role as first lieutenant. The job demanded a certain modicum of recklessness. And, of course, a certain familiarity with the gangbanging lifestyle and the battle scars that came with it. Though he'd retired from the battlefield, the survival of the fittest remained the law of that jungle.

The violence these Darkmen meted out made them a different breed of animal than that found in the slums. They were worse than the usual threat to life and limb. They were a bad bunch. That was what Guy's unfailingly accurate instincts told him. The worst of the lot. Sowing a brand of fear that made Guy quake in his boots.

Kirie hadn't shown his face around them in ages. No matter how brazen he might be, Kirie had his limits. And even when he came out in the open, he always played his cards close to the vest. He was sufficiently paranoid about things like that.

Guy didn't know where Kirie lived. Nor was he interested enough in Kirie to dig any deeper. So he didn't have a clue where Kirie even *could* be.

"I don't know." That was all the remaining three of them could say.

Unexpectedly, the man laughed. A cold, piercing laugh that barely lifted the corners of his pale lips.

A moment later, with a shock, the gooseflesh came out on Guy's skin. A twitching spasm shot through his sides. A cold shiver shot up his spine as the man's roundhouse kick connected with his temple.

Guy reflexively raised his arms to his face to parry the attack, but

the blow alone was fierce enough to snatch him out of the chair and lay him flat. His brains reeled in his skull. Sparks flew across the backs of his tightly closed eyes. His head throbbed as if his gray matter had been brought to a boil. His heart beat hard enough to burst out of his chest.

The man grabbed Guy by the shirt. As if to show off his strength, with one arm he lifted Guy to eye level. "How about now? Bring back any memories?"

"I—don't—know—"

The man's free hand came flying at Guy before he could say anything more. "Then do you know who would?"

His trembling lips oozing blood, Guy limply shook his head.

Another ringing blow landed on his cheek.

"I see. Well, then. Let's take this from the beginning again. And we're going to keep on doing it with each and every one of you until somebody's memory starts to improve."

The bystanders to the carnage shuddered as one.

Chapter 3

In the cold, constant, falling rain, Kirie crawled into a crevice in the caved-in ruins of a building and cast a timid look at his surroundings. It was pitch-black, without even the faint glow from the street lights. Nothing was slinking through the shadows. There was only the steady drumbeat of the unrelenting rain.

He held his breath. Didn't move a muscle. But unable to calm the anxieties that covered him like a damp blanket, he raised his wavering eyes, and with fear in his heart crawled back into the rain.

Where could he go? What refuge would be best? Kirie had no idea—he only knew that he had to get away. That driving compulsion hammered inside his skull.

He drove his unsteady legs onward, stumbled, fell. Got to his feet again, limbs trembling. He didn't have time to feel pain.

He finally noticed he was getting closer to the Colony. His heart beat raggedly. His shoulders heaved. A sharp cramp pierced his sides. His dragging feet felt as if they were encased in concrete. The cold penetrated him to the core, making his teeth chatter. But he couldn't rest.

He had to keep going, one foot ahead of the next. He had to put as much distance between them as possible.

Hugging the walls, he crept down the dirty, drab alleyways.

But there were limits to what willpower alone could accomplish. And the pounding rain only ate away at his resolve.

He staggered and collapsed and sprawled in the dirt and garbage. His body was so limp and depleted he could not push enough strength into his legs to get to his feet again.

Finally, a moan escaped his lips. As if the cord of his will had finally snapped clean, the tears poured out of him in a seemingly endless

stream. His weeping at last dissolved into a small, wordless hiccup, as if he'd managed to bite down to the kernel of his despair and spit out the husk. He stared up at the sky, lost in its great vastness, and cried out in delirium.

"Somebody—help—me—please! I don't want to die. *Help me, Riki—!*

Chapter 4

Ceres. The western reaches of the Colony. Block 24.

It was almost eleven when Riki got back to his apartment. He was drenched. The falling temperatures had left him chilled to the bone as well. His cold-weather motorcycle jacket was water-resistant, but had soaked up enough water to turn the bright metallic blue a muddy indigo. His old black trousers were no exception. Neither was his underwear. The cold penetrated him to the marrow.

Shit, he muttered to himself. The weather only pissed him off more. Perhaps it was his misery that annoyed him the most. Or, it was chasing his tail all over town and being made a fool. His gray matter felt like soggy newspaper. But his thoughts wouldn't rest. At any rate, the first thing on his agenda was to warm himself up. He could tend to his unsettled thoughts later.

With trembling lips that felt like rubber, he stripped off his clothes and jumped into the shower. The hot spray felt like pins and needles all over his body. His frozen, shivering muscles finally began to thaw. His stiff body began to feel human once again. He took a deep breath.

That was when his phone hummed, indicating an incoming message. Thinking it might be a call from Guy, he turned off the water. It wasn't a phone call, but an alert announcing a visitor. And, based on the ring tone, that somebody had an unlisted number.

"What the hell—?" he muttered to himself. His dashed expectations only gnawed at him further. And he directed his ire at that stranger. "Piss off already."

He cranked up the shower and closed his eyes. In the slums everybody erred on the side of self-preservation, and watched their own backs first. Nobody would excuse bad behavior, but neither would they look kindly upon anybody who exposed a weakness.

Valuables would get stolen as a matter of course, and as long as no dead bodies showed up, the cops weren't going to investigate a

mere forced entry or assault. Rather than waste time crying over losses, it was best to have a good defense.

A stranger showing up on Riki's doorstep on a dark and stormy night was out of the norm. Since Iason had pulled the same stunt the other day, Riki had been paying more attention than usual to his security.

That night, even after getting himself so wasted that he couldn't have walked a straight line to save his life, he was shocked at the ease with which Iason had taken him by surprise.

After that—to whatever extent he could say such things—he wouldn't be spending much time in his own home. But it would do to keep his wits about him in the meantime.

He finally stopped shivering, though his insides could stand some warming up. He stepped out of the shower and saw that his phone was still blinking.

Geez, give it a rest, he said to himself again. That fool was one stubborn bastard.

The chime from the front door echoed through the small apartment. Riki jumped despite himself and swallowed hard. With the rushing water in the shower, he hadn't heard it before. Whoever it was had probably been ringing non-stop.

What does this asshole want—?

Riki's brains must have been frozen solid. The doorbell sounded like a booming klaxon to him now. He pulled on his bathrobe. *A malfunction, maybe?* He drew his eyebrows together. *Some dumb, practical joke?* That was the only conclusion the clamoring noise pointed to.

What? What? What!

Having already been stood up by Guy, the tight spring of his emotions coiled tighter. But he wasn't so addled by his rising sense of irritation that he was just going to throw open the door.

Anything could happen in the slums, at any time and anywhere. Though the score had been settled with Jeeks, that didn't necessarily mean the whole game was over. Riki still had to be cautious. He switched on the peephole camera and saw a man he didn't know standing there.

Who the hell is that?

The man's sharp eyes glared into the camera lens. He looked to be around thirty or so, which confused Riki all the more. Riki didn't hang out with guys in their thirties. It wasn't that he had nothing to say to them and gave them the cold shoulder; in fact, *they* were the ones who went out of their way to avoid *him*.

And not just because he was Riki. But because he was of "that age," and crossing that generational divide was always difficult. Where they ate and drank, the territories they carved out for their daily lives, necessarily isolated them. The one possible exception was the haunts where they went cruising for sex partners.

More than the man's persistent ringing of his doorbell, the cool glint in his eyes made Riki hesitate. Times like that, his best recourse was to play it dumb and back away slowly. The impulse to do just that was already licking at his senses.

When it came to deranged stalkers, one Iason was enough. At that point, Riki had already had enough drama to last a lifetime. Those thoughts pressed heavily on his mind, making the hair stand up on the back of his neck as he felt a premonition of danger.

The way the man was hugging the door, he didn't look like he'd be leaving anytime soon. Not after he'd confirmed that Riki was at home. It was a little too late to go around turning off the lights and sitting quietly in the darkness.

Riki scowled. "Who are you?" he asked over the intercom and steeled himself for the worst.

No answer came, but at least the incessantly ringing doorbell finally stopped. The expression on the man's face changed subtly but distinctively. Enough to give Riki the clear impression that he didn't

care for his existence.

"What do you want?"

"If you don't want me breaking down this door, let me in." The man's first words were full of bluster and irritation. A voice pitched low, grim and tense. In a completely different manner than Iason, it carried a weight that resounded deep in Riki's gut.

Riki sensed big trouble coming his way. But there was no ignoring it now. Besides, he didn't doubt that the man really would come crashing in.

Gritting his teeth, he unlocked the door.

The first thing Riki saw coming at him the second the door cracked open was the black luster of a gun. He instinctively jerked back. A second man—hiding somewhere out of view—pushed in after him, dressed all in black and moving in a manner that suggested he wasn't an ordinary working stiff.

Shit—

The turn of events was totally unexpected. Riki didn't feel or think anything. He was simply dumbfounded and couldn't grasp what was happening before his eyes.

In the slums, where gun control was strongly enforced, only a cop would ever brandish a firearm—let alone one with laser sights. And these guys sure didn't look like slum cops.

Guns at the ready, the men turned the apartment upside down. Looking under the bed. Checking out the closets. Peering into every nook and cranny. What they were looking for and what Riki had to do with any of it—nobody was providing any explanations.

For all their efforts, their search was unsuccessful. Unless it was just a show before getting down to the job at hand. The men exchanged glances and again pointed their guns at Riki. During that time, Riki had been keeping a cool head, trying to figure out who these guys were. But then a strange and unsettling sensation began welling up inside him.

He'd be lying if he said he wasn't scared at the sight of those guns. But the shock eyes dangling from their utility belts pointed to just one conclusion: *these assholes are Midas Darkmen*.

A renewed sense of surprise hit him. What were Darkmen doing there? And why? Confusion, amazement, and suspicion swelled inside him all at once.

As far as Riki knew, the Midas Darkmen—who despised the existence of the slum mongrels—were equally prisoners of their PAM devices. Then what was going on? How could they have crossed an impenetrable border?

Riki knew he wasn't a walking encyclopedia, but he'd never once heard of Midas cops forcing their way into Ceres. In the first place, such an occurrence would have thrown the slums into a panic. Up until a few minutes ago, the flow of human traffic had been one way—from the slums outward because of PAM. But what if that wasn't really the case?

That was a reality Riki didn't want to contemplate. He seriously wanted it all to be some sort of waking dream. One trip he'd never take again.

"You Riki?" said the man with short-cropped, silver hair.

After they'd ransacked the place and stuck their guns in Riki's face, hearing them throw his name at him as an afterthought didn't do much to assuage his temper.

"What if I am?" he shot back, not bothering to hide his bad mood. Their intrusion into his home was stirring up feelings of disgust and suspicion. Despite the surprise and bewilderment, he wasn't feeling timid at all.

Riki's shining black eyes focused on the man with the silver crew cut that covered his skull like a slab of dry ice. He wasn't trying to strike a provocative pose with the Darkman or anything.

Whether taking that as a gritty act of defiance or an ill-advised bluff, the man glared at the bathrobed, damp-haired Riki with

seemingly new eyes. Then, without a twitch of an eyebrow, he said in a high-handed manner. "Get dressed."

There was a hardness in his voice, that of a man used to giving orders and having them followed. Compared to a guy like Katze, though, whose tempered toughness could silence black market ruffians with a single glance, the man had a bit of warmth about him. And he possessed nothing like Iason's absolute and cruel authority that could turn the sternest resolve to jelly.

There was no way that Darkman was going to intimidate Riki. But it was neither the time nor the place to make any futile last stands. Riki knew that in his bones.

"Fine." Better to step on the brakes than pop off with a useless display of ego. He turned on his heels, feeling the man's gaze on his back like a knife point.

Chapter 5

The Midas police station sat silent and alone under the driving rain. Its gray, wet exterior revealed nothing out of the ordinary, making it appear all the more unpretentious and austere. Within the environs of Midas, where the omnipresent shock of the new and the gaudy almost became oppressive, that was a building that stood apart.

As that clash of scenery came into view, Riki couldn't help wrinkling his nose in disgust. He found himself frowning all over again. He never would have imagined Darkmen barging into his apartment, forcing him into an air ear, and dragging him there.

Riki suspected the only reason the man told him to change his clothes was because he couldn't stand the sight of Riki standing there in his bathrobe like a wet dog.

What in the world was going on?

A thousand questions banged around inside Riki's head. He hadn't foreseen things turning from bad to worse so quickly. He wanted answers, but the men restraining him didn't look like they were in the mood for casual conversation. Those types treated slum mongrels like they were contagious, and would never even deign to look someone like Riki in the eye.

So the trip was a silent one.

Riki couldn't get comfortable. He was at his wits' end and couldn't relax. But the atmosphere inside the car was even worse. Committing no crime and yet suddenly being carted off by the cops, imagining what lay in store for him only fanned the flames of his anxiety.

The slum mongrels cruised the luxurious Midas nights for thrills and profit, and mostly to divert their attention from the oppressive claustrophobia of daily life in Ceres. It had become a rite of passage for the reckless young studs.

All the residents of the slums knew exactly what fate would befall them if they screwed up and got caught in Midas. Beaten black and blue. Limbs broken. The stuffing kicked out of them.

The Vigilante Corps in each area were not forgiving. Spot a mongrel, and they'd invent any pretext to justify thrashing him soundly—in some dark alley out of sight of passersby, of course.

Mingling in with the tourists and sightseers, the mongrels could blend in without a PAM device. But the Vigilante Corps had devised some way of singling them out and the mongrels were getting picked off with increasing regularity. Sometimes, a dead body ended up in a ditch somewhere, but the Midas cops could be counted on to brand it a John Doe and sweep the incident under the rug.

The slum mongrels had no civil rights. No grounds for seeking justice or compensation. That was life.

Riki was no longer in his territory. He was in the Darkmen's stomping grounds. That fact flitting across his senses was enough to make him clench his teeth and grimace.

The air car floated above the sea of garish neon, and then plunged down to the rooftop carport just above the black hole of the Midas Police Center. With a slight shimmer, the air car landed. At the same time, the shuttered doors of the roof closed tight. When the air car had come to a complete halt, a jab at Riki's back told to get out.

The apparent leader of the group—the man with the short, silver hair—went first. After him followed two men with Riki in tow, one at each shoulder. Close behind were two more backing them up. Riki was tightly contained in a solid wall of four men. It was like getting stuffed in a box. Every breath came hard and shallow. Though he wasn't handcuffed or shackled, it wasn't the treatment a mere material witness would expect. It was more like that doled out to deranged killers.

Naturally, a slum mongrel could assert all the civil rights in the world. And the Darkmen could be expected to accord him none.

After walking for a little while, they arrived at an elevator. Riki hesitated slightly in front of the elevator, and was jabbed in the back for it. Riki stumbled forward, crashing head-on into the chest of the silver-haired man.

As expected, there was not an ounce of give in the iron grip of the man's arms. The guy was all muscle and bone and nothing else, evidence of a daily workout regimen. Or a byproduct of what God gave him. Either way, the man's arms were even bigger than the epitome of android engineering that was Iason. Though Riki couldn't have said for sure if any of them were sporting man-made bodies or not. Frankly, if told the men surrounding him *were* androids, he would believe it.

Riki couldn't detect any body heat rising from them. Did veins of ice run through those limbs? He gave the forearms holding him a good long look.

You guys even human? But he wasn't so stupid as to ask that out loud.

The man he crashed into only hiked up an eyebrow. He said nothing. Instead, the one who shoved Riki stood at attention and said in a tense voice, "Sorry about that."

Riki couldn't have cared less either way.

The elevator descended from the roof to the second basement level in a shot. The doors opened without a sound. At that point, two of the guards left. Riki was relieved. All the way down, that walled in sense of claustrophobia had been driving him crazy.

The hallway was so brightly lit it almost blinded him. They continued down the corridor, Riki sandwiched between the remaining men. But the space around him opened up a bit, enough to give him a little air, enough to lift his spirits, albeit slightly.

He couldn't help flitting his gaze around his surroundings. Aside from the doors set into the walls on both sides of the hallway, he saw nothing out of the ordinary.

Because, no matter what, he was in the bowels of what every slum mongrel regarded as infamous: the Police Center.

Riki had been brought against his will to the black hole of every slum mongrel's nightmares. Nobody left there with everything still intact. Body, mind, and spirit got put through the grinder, and what came out the other end wasn't good for much more than compost. Anyone brought there would become an object lesson for the rest of them.

Riki couldn't help imagining what fate awaited him in such a horrible place. He couldn't pretend the thought didn't have his nerves on end. But even getting dragged there with no explanations, he wasn't so stupid as to try and strike a defiant pose. It wasn't the time or place to take the long view and make the best of it.

There being no sin or crime clouding his mind, he wasn't particularly frightened. He had no need to beg and whimper. Or so he thought. The way Riki saw things wasn't necessarily the way the Darkmen saw things. As long as he was a slum mongrel, truth and justice and human rights all went out the window.

But he could bluff as well as be bluffed, so he might as well keep his wits about him. Keep focused on what was happening. He knew those fixed and immovable parts of him could allow no fissures or cracks to develop. That conviction was his one true defense, the only way he'd keep a grip and get out of there alive.

When he was at Guardian, when he was leading Bison, when he was making a name for himself in the black market as "Riki the Black"—that article of faith had never failed him.

Except when it came to Iason. That was why he wore a pet ring.

Brilliant and crafty. Heartlessly charismatic. Biding his time. Iason carefully laid his traps. Unable to escape and cornered with a tenacity Riki struggled to comprehend, the only thing obvious was the pain of being bound in shackles.

Assaulted and plundered, run ragged until he gave up. The humiliations festered inside of him. The throbbing, obscene poisons

dissolved the remnants of his inner resolve, making him gasp until his throat was dry. The tingling, pleasant numbness pierced his brain until conscious thought escaped him.

And yet Riki still couldn't figure it out. A Tanagura Blondy could have whatever his heart desired. Why had he gone to such lengths to make a lap dog out of a slum mongrel?

*I so cherish these enlivening moments when you defy me even as a Blondy. When you react to me so **humanly**. I feel myself tingling right down to the center of my brain. I love how you look at me with such undisguised disdain. It is so endearing I want to rip out your beating heart and press it against my cheek.*

That Iason would go to such lengths even in a mere moment of whimsy was more than an expression of troubled taste, but of a profound illness. An elite with his bewitching android body saying anything of the sort in public would be taken as a joke.

Those thoughts spinning through his head, Riki noted that the people passing now and then along the corridor would invariably straighten their posture and jmd to the silver-haired man.

Huh. This guy's no ordinary cop.

The respectful looks the man attracted spoke of his status or lineage, which only confused Riki more. Why would a man of such rank and distinction be messing with a slum mongrel? What circumstances would drive him to call Riki out by name and haul his ass in?

What is going on?

Riki couldn't begin to imagine. Nothing in Midas should connect back to him. Nothing in the past. Nothing in the present. And looking to the future, until Iason got tired of him—

But as was to be expected, with no explanation of the circumstances forthcoming, Riki was photographed, fingerprinted, and had his retinas scanned. From beginning to end, he was treated as a hardened criminal, pushed and shoved around.

Riki started getting a bit nervous. *I may be in deeper shit than I thought.*

He had never in his life been so stupid as to intentionally step on the tail of the Midas tiger. But he had obviously gotten caught up in some sort of trouble without being aware of it. And if it was so bad that the Midas Darkmen had been dispatched to clean up the mess, odds were he wasn't alone.

Tie up your loose ends, Iason had told him. Leave your regrets behind in the slums.

But he hadn't imagined that something like this would happen, what with things between him and Guy still up in the air. Wheels he'd never seen were definitely turning in places he didn't know. As usual, Riki was left alone at the controls.

Things were not looking good. When worse comes to worst—or rather, now that worse had already come to worst—he'd end up on the Midas police blacklist. That would mean very bad news for him.

And if it came out that he was Iason's pet—and if Iason found out—then what? Dwelling on such worst-case scenarios, Riki felt his face grow pale.

The backlash. The provocation. The self-flagellation.

Those three years in Eos, Riki was the brat who'd never been truly *schooled*, who never *learned*. Arrogant, pigheaded, obstinate. Just as Iason had taunted him, Riki didn't know when to give in and step aside. Everybody was his enemy. He was an unevolved ape who couldn't back down when it was in his best interest. Back then, Riki had done everything in his power to rub Iason's face in it. This time around, though, things were completely different.

In a sense, Eos was a messy birdcage, kept apart from the world. Never doubting that the worth of their identity could be summed up only in the scrap of paper attesting to their birth, the pets fawned over their masters. And at the same time, they were haughty and conniving and childish to the point of fragility.

That beauty and licentiousness were their highest virtues was ingrained on their psyches. And yet it was the shamelessness of the slum-bred Riki that drove them crazy with loathing. Naturally, mocking Riki as a mongrel and baring their fangs, they never once reflected on the fact that they themselves amounted to little more than pitiful sex dolls.

It never dawned on them until their pet registrations were deleted and, like the lining of that birdcage, they were cast out of Eos into the brothels of Midas.

But feeling no empathy for their plight didn't mean that Riki basked in any sense of superiority either. Lording it over the purebred, hothouse-raised pets would be no different than the citizens of Midas scorning the mongrels and calling them trash for not having official ID cards.

Riki couldn't easily consider them all in the same position. But looking reality right in the face and seeing, hearing, and doing nothing—that was the sort of careless stupidity he couldn't help smirking at.

There were as many different human values as there were humans. Change the star under which one was born, and a different man created a different reality, even in the same time and place. Perhaps being raised in loving ignorance was the better course. When Riki was working as a courier for Katze, he couldn't help feeling that keenly.

Which was why, even revisiting all the beatings he'd asked for during those three years in Eos, there was no denying the truth behind what was said and done.

Holding up reality for everybody to see was painful no matter how he sliced it. The reality was that some people really couldn't handle the truth. And in those cases it was better to keep the lid secured tightly.

Back when Riki was a pet for Iason, in a way that Riki found difficult to grasp, Iason was both an indulgent and cruel taskmaster. A slum mongrel and a Tanagura Blondy valued the world in

completely different ways, and Riki had no sense of Iason's breaking points. Though in retrospect, it must have been *because* Eos was such an isolated birdcage that Iason forgave Riki his outrageous and audacious ways.

All that made the situation Riki was in all the more dangerous. By the time he was relentlessly pushed and prodded into a room, the angry red flush of his temper burned on the back of his neck. Inside the room were a small, sturdy table and a chair that made the uselessly large dimensions of the room seem all the more off-putting.

There was nothing else, except for the cameras in the ceiling. According to the specs Riki had memorized, these cameras had a 360-degree field of vision with zoom capability. They were disguised well, but the same make and model of camera was situated everywhere in Eos to observe the pets.

Riki knew they were there and ignored them. The other pets probably didn't have a clue. He didn't know who was looking on, but in a monitoring room somewhere the conversations that went on in that large room would be heard perfectly.

At the other extreme, the mechanisms were in place so that any unforeseen "accidents" occurring there would never leave the four walls of the room.

The silver-haired man had hardly spoken an unnecessary word while he was dragging Riki there from the slums. Now he sat down across the table from him. The man's redheaded subordinate hovered menacingly and wordlessly behind Riki's back.

"So? What's up?" Riki said.

The silver-haired man—the redhead had previously addressed him as Chief—didn't seem the talkative type, so Riki went first. And immediately felt the hairs on the back of his neck prick up as the redhead loomed behind him.

He was disrespecting the Darkmen's boss, a damned fool who didn't know the precarious position he was in, but Riki frankly didn't feel

like wasting any more of his time with all the runaround.

"What exactly are you charging me with?"

"You know this Kirie kid?"

It was the one question Riki least expected to have thrown at him. For a moment he just stared back in surprise.

"Where is he?"

"You gotta be kidding me. You dragged me all the way down here to ask me that?"

"Not only you."

Riki gulped.

"Kirie used to run with that bunch of hoodlums called Bison, right?"

Riki knew at once what was going on. Why Guy had missed their date. An unforeseen variable had intervened. That Guy hadn't blown him off on purpose gave him at least a moment of relief. And the next moment he was roiling mad at that man sitting in front of him, barking up the wrong tree. That bastard Kirie.

"And you're the leader of that gang."

What a fucking waste of time.

"Bison broke up a long time ago. I'm not the leader of anything." He would have thought these guys had better intel than that. Riki wanted to drive his fist into the chief's face. The bad cop routine was getting under his skin and pissing him off. It made him want to retch.

"So you all squared away your stories first, eh? Honor among thieves, is that it?" The man pressed with a slight sneer, "How far will you go to cover up for him?"

As far as Riki—and anybody connected with Bison—was concerned, the man was repeating a bad joke that long ago stopped being

funny. But he apparently hadn't the slightest sense that he'd simply jumped to the wrong conclusion.

"Kirie is bad luck. A jinx. There's no way we'd have any idea where he is." And while Riki was at it, he had to add his own thoughts. "The next time you Midas cops come charging across the borderlines into the slums, you might want to get some accurate information first. Pretty embarrassing to see you all dancing around to some half-baked bar talk that wouldn't be taken seriously on a bathroom wall."

A split second later, a boot connected with Riki's side and he toppled from the chair, groaning, the wind knocked clean out of him. The blood churned in his veins, making his pulse thud like a bass drum against the inside of his skull.

The redhead grabbed him by the collar and, with hardly a grunt, dragged him back into the chair.

"We don't take no backtalk from slum scum like you," he hissed in Riki's ear, with no attempt to hide his contempt. "Don't try to hold out on us." The redhead's coarse laughter stabbed like an ice pick through Riki's eardrums.

At that juncture, the redhead's sense of humor hadn't yet gotten to Riki. But with the image of Kirie's smug face planted in his thoughts, Riki called to mind every expletive in the book and hurling them at him, and managed to take some of the edge off.

"Where is he?" asked the man across the table. The tone of his voice hadn't changed.

"I—don't—know—"

"You expect me to believe that? One of your made men? One of your brothers?"

Never a made man! No brother of mine!

Kirie dreamed his own dreams and attached himself to the ghost name that was Bison. Learning that the resurrection of Bison being talked about was nothing more than an urban rumor, Kirie had

gone off on his own and left a steaming pile of shit behind.

The kiss of death.

Even if Riki had owed Kirie big time, that score was settled long ago. If Riki knew where Kirie was camped out, he would have said so before the first blow landed. He had no desire to throw down with the Midas Darkmen.

But from the start, the Darkmen went on ignoring the obvious. If they didn't want to listen to what anybody had to say, they could have gone in with the memory retrieval drugs from the start and rummaged around in the gray matter all they wanted. They didn't even try that. Obviously, tormenting Riki was so much fun they didn't mind the extra time and labor.

Yet as pissed off as Riki was with the Darkmen, the focus of his anger was all on Kirie. The last time he'd seen him was on the Orange Road. He'd pounded in the side of Kirie's face and told him, *You don't ever want to show me your face again, Kirie. Not if you want to keep all your limbs.*

It was the truth. Seeing Kirie one more time would be one more time too many. Riki didn't want to see him or even hear the sound of his voice. If possible, he would erase Kirie's existence from his brain. And he had every intention of trying.

Kirie, no doubt, felt the same way.

Riki had no idea where and how these Midas Darkmen got ahold of the information. But if it was from the former Bison gang members, that was one damned unlucky draw of the short straw. The kind of disastrous turn of events that made him grind his teeth in frustration.

He couldn't say what he didn't know. He couldn't offer what he didn't have. But the Darkmen wouldn't follow that simple logic. It was definitely the worst case scenario.

"Spit it out."

"I. Don't. Know!"

Another blow to his kidneys. Riki gasped and clawed at the tabletop. The incandescent pain roared through his body, emerging in inarticulate groans. His bones and muscles screamed. The convulsing scream of burning, bending, twisting pain rushed through every fiber in his body.



Driving his raw, trembling nerves beyond what any pleasures could

accomplish, pure physical pain of a sort he was entirely unaccustomed to all but made the blood boil in his veins.

"I don't have time to play around anymore. Let's hear it!"

Despite their elite status within the Midas Division of Public Safety, rumors of the Darkmen's brutality were whispered throughout the Commonwealth star systems.

Half of it was propaganda generated to perpetuate the law and order facade that Midas operated under. Half was a veiled warning to libertine visitors who might take too seriously the lack of taboos in Midas. Though because these free-spending guests were their meal ticket, the Midas cops tended to exercise a modicum of moderation on their behalf.

It was all carrot and stick. In the right balance, it was the perfect strategy for avoiding unnecessary trouble. But that didn't apply to slum mongrels.

"Out with it!"

The redhead grabbed Riki with one hand, hoisted him off the table, and slapped him across the face.

The ultra-compact mobile device on the left wrist of the silver-haired Chief Marcus chirped shrilly. He flashed a look at his subordinate Jayd—the redhead who was enjoying beating the tar out of Riki—then took an earpiece from his jacket pocket and turned it on.

"What?"

"This a good time, Chief?"

"Go ahead."

"Concerning number G:05—" Their internal code for Riki.

"Anything on him?"

An emergency call getting put through in the middle of an interrogation was no ordinary thing. Marcus had to believe it had something to do with Riki.

"Clean as a whistle. But some strange data did show up in a different context. Can't figure it out."

His subordinate's unusually clipped answer made Marcus furrow his brow. *Cut to the chase*, he was about to tell him when the voice on the other end of the line said, "Sorry about this, but I think you better come down here."

"Understood," Marcus said, ending the call. He wondered what sort of strange data could have come up.

"Jayd," he said, "I have to take care of this. You're coming too." Leaving Jayd alone in the room with Riki didn't strike Marcus as a wise course of action.

Jayd looked back at him, a spark of displeasure showing in his eyes. But he didn't object. Everybody tacitly agreed that there was no coddling of slum mongrels in their precinct, but the enthusiasm with which Jayd took to the task worried Marcus.

The mongrel could no doubt benefit from a bit more of a working over. He had pride and he had guts. Bloody but unbowed. As far as slum trash went, he was one tough cookie.

But breaking him before he fessed up wouldn't do them any good. Marcus had his own pride to tend to as chief of the Darkmen. His duty was to secure the peace and hunt down the criminals who feasted on Midas like parasites. Thus, his Darkmen had to be respected and feared by everyone—citizens, the illegal refugee sinkers, and especially the slum mongrels. The slum mongrels could only be controlled if they felt that fear in their very blood. According to the reports from the team he'd sent in, that fear was palpable after merely flashing their tasing nightsticks; ashen faces and trembling lips could be seen everywhere.

But the kid they called the old Bison boss was different. Sticking a gun in his face brought him up short, to be sure. But even knowing

Marcus was a Darkman didn't make shake him. Marcus hadn't seen a speck of that expected fear.

There was something different about Riki's eyes. They weren't the eyes of some lowlife hoodlum. Call him foolhardy for recklessly calling their bluff, but the kid knew what to do. That was more than mere guts. Those were eyes that had been places and seen things. The kid carried more than a few notches on his belt.

Alcohol and drugs. Gangbanging and banging anything that moved. They drowned in their lives of depravity as hopeless packs of slum trash. All mongrels were the same—or so Marcus had thought.

Somehow, that Riki was different. With a brazenness bordering on impudence, the kid was no pushover, that was for certain. Which was why Marcus had dragged him all the way there. He had to nail things down, control the environment, or he'd get nowhere.

It was possible Riki had a past Marcus hadn't anticipated, that he'd been to Hell and back—and as the thought struck him, Marcus had to shake his head and smile ruefully to himself. *What's all the fuss about this slum mongrel for?*

Marcus had Jayd accompany him from the interrogation room to a monitoring room on the same floor. The subordinates working in the room all stood and bowed when the two men entered.

Marcus answered with a slight nod and sat down. "And?" he asked, turning to Gayle. "What's this strange data about G:05?" *It'd better be damned important to interrupt me in the middle of my interrogation,* was implicit in the question.

"Yes. You see, he's registered as a pet."

"A *pet*?" burst out Jayd, forgetting his place.

"What are you saying, Gayle? We're talking about a slum mongrel."

"That's what it says."

Quit the jokes. Marcus didn't say it, but that was exactly the thought on his mind.

"This scum-sucking slum trash?" Jayd shouted, glaring at Gayle. "Give me a fucking break!" To Jayd, a slum mongrel becoming a pet—even as a joke—wasn't funny.

"We thought so too. That's why we checked and double-checked it."

By the time Gayle placed his emergency call to Marcus, he had already anticipated Jayd's reaction. Marcus asked him point-blank, "You're sure about this?"

"Positive," Gayle replied shortly, handing Marcus the printout.

Registered pet number: Z-107M. Code name: Riki. Sex: Male. Hair: Black. Eyes: Black. Birthplace: Ceres, Guardian.

Even more amazing, the registration date was four years ago. *Four years ago? This has got to be some kind of system error.*

"We checked it against his retinal scans."

Marcus scrutinized the young face in the mug shot and growled to himself.

"Access is restricted by a level three security encryption code. This can't be an ordinary punk kid. He's got to have big time connections somewhere."

With each new unexpected revelation, the cleft between Marcus's eyebrows grew deeper. They usually had the correct security level to access the Pet Administration records, and the authority of the Midas Division of Public Safety should take priority.

Then what's a mere pet being classified level three for? Every possible answer defied common sense. The situation had gotten out of hand. Marcus didn't have the words to describe how deep the shit was getting.

Jayd looked over his shoulder at the printout. His body seemed to petrify on the spot. "Are you *serious*?" he roared, his voice on the

verge of turning shrill.

"It says what it says."

"A slum mongrel? A lump of good-for-nothing trash? How does something like that become a pet?" Jayd went on, unable to accept the truth staring him in the face.

Jayd wasn't the only one asking that question. Everybody in the room was screaming inside. *Pick anyone in the universe. Why pick a slum mongrel?* The whole thing seemed like a joke. *There was no fucking way.*

But what they knew now couldn't be denied. No matter what they wanted.

"Whose pet?" Marcus asked.

Gayle fell momentarily silent.

"I asked, who is this pet's owner?"

Gayle had tried to keep it back, but couldn't any longer. "A Tanagura Blondy."

Marcus and Jayd gaped at him.

"The actual owner's name is masked, but this S-class code is unmistakably that of a Tanagura Blondy." When it came to digesting the impact of the alarming turn of events, Gayle had a jump on Marcus and Jayd. But his voice had still not recovered from the shock. "How do we proceed with this? A Blondy pet prowling around the slums could become a scandal of unprecedented proportions."

Slum mongrels belonged in the slums. Everybody knew that. But a mongrel that was a Blondy pet—that changed everything. Far from a mere scandal, there was the greater issue of violating Pet Law.

How had things come to that point? *What in the world is going on?* The mystery only deepened.

Eos pets normally had their registrations erased when they were tossed away and sold off in Midas. Aside from a few special cases, there were no exceptions to the rule. The added value of being reared in Eos made them the main attraction in the Midas brothels.

Blondy pets attracted even greater premiums, because a Blondy pet was usually Academy-bred. Female breeders were prized even more. Any offspring they produced were recognized as the property of that brothel. It was no exaggeration to say that a brothel's status was tied directly to how well it protected its purebred Academy lines.

Ignoring the Pet Law that laid down these cardinal precepts was a serious crime.

Was it even possible that a Tanagura Blondy could violate Pet Law? It could *not* be possible. The Blondies were the elite of the elite. They never made mistakes. However—

"Is this pet registration record still valid?"

"Yes. It shows no trace of being deleted, forged, or otherwise tampered with."

"If that's true, then this thing has been on some Blondy's leash for the past four years."

That a slum mongrel had been kept in Eos came as a surprise, but even more startling was that the same pet was living in the slums.

It was *inconceivable*. The thought itself was repulsive and common sense said it was impossible. Eos security dwarfed anything in Midas. A pet simply couldn't escape from there.

"Just to make sure, couldn't we request a confirmation of these records?" Gayle suggested, still to the notion that it might be an error in the Pet Administration system. That would be an appropriate measure—if standards procedures applied.

"No. Leave it."

"But, Chief. None of this makes sense, no matter how we look at it.

Do you see a pet ring anywhere?"

The pet ring was a pricey accessory that stood in lieu of a personal ID. A ring or necklace or earring. It was jewelry that, in addition to advertising the creature's status as a pet, advertised its owner's status as well.

Consequently, popular practice was to make the pet ring as ostentatious as possible. It would have never occurred to them to suspect a D-type cock ring. If they knew such a thing existed.

"A pet without a pet ring isn't a pet, right? That means—"

"That means this situation is even more complicated than it first appeared."

A Blondy letting a pet run free outside the confines of Eos made no sense. It was unthinkable. But the unthinkable was sitting there right in front of them. Such was their confusion that they simply couldn't wrap their minds around it.

But that was—and would continue to be—*their* problem. Darkmen though they might be, there was no way they could go tromping into the territory of the Tanagura elites.

"Despite the missing pet ring, it certainly has a pet registration record. The odds of it being a system error are small. As irrational as this may sound, I can't accept that a pet has been prowling around the slums just for the hell of it. Or that Pet Administration made a clerical error. We have to conclude that this is what its master wishes."

Pet Law applied to the Tanagura elites as well as their pets. It did not stand to reason that the flawless Blondies would defy the rules. Treating a pet like some sort of free range animal—how could that ever be condoned? And if not condoned, then what circumstances brought it about?

Everybody turned their attention to the image of Riki on the monitors, still sprawled on the desk in the interrogation room.

What was this creature? They all asked themselves.

"Is that *really* a slum mongrel?" Gayle asked himself in a loud whisper.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"His place of birth is definitely registered as the Ceres foster center. But what if that's a cover for something else?"

"Like what?"

"I have no idea. But I can't believe that a level 3 security access restriction is totally unrelated."

To be sure, nobody could open Eos pet records on a whim and go browsing through them. But sealing a record with an encrypted access code—no matter how they looked at it, was not normal.

Something was going on. The questions welled in their minds unbidden. As if a positive retinal scan had tripped some sort of trap door, or a vulgar digital snare was laid down to deliberately raise a red flag. It was like a puzzle dangling out there tempting them to try and solve it. Or maybe it meant nothing at all.

Though he might be just imagining things, Gayle couldn't stop thinking about it. "You can't get any lower than a slum mongrel, right? So what fool would fake his own birth records and bury himself at the bottom of a slag heap?"

Prejudice and contempt. The ever-present sense of disdain and superiority. The fruits of a Midas education had seeped into the marrow of Jayd's bones. Gayle's words only aroused repugnance in him.

Up until then, Haggard had been quietly watching things unfold. "There are plenty of sinkers who make like mongrels and hide out in the slums."

"That's because they don't have a choice," Jayd rejoined with a cluck of distaste. "It's sink or swim for them."

Nobody contradicted Jayd. It was different for those whose birth planet set them apart, or imbued them with some special

characteristic. But for the most part, the significant number of illegal aliens known as sinkers mingled in with the slum mongrels and kept their distance from the Midas Division of Public Safety.

Once their entry visas expired, Tanagura no longer recognized their existence. So visitors and sightseers who didn't leave when their visas ran out were declared undocumented and arrested on the spot.

Excuses didn't matter. Immigration control didn't want to hear about accidents. The rowdy and bad-tempered among them were added to a blacklist and forcibly repatriated.

Toe the line and follow the rules and Midas was a taboo-free paradise. Abuse the rules and discover that the velvet glove covered a mailed fist.

People were forgetful animals. Whatever hell a traveler raised, whatever compromising positions he found himself in, he preferred to leave it all behind him. But Tanagura wasn't so eager to forget. Step outside the lines and he'd suffer the consequences.

Being registered on the blacklist meant a nanochip being imbedded in the base of the skull, making a return visit to the planet of Amoy impossible. Any attempts to disregard the ban and enter illegally, for example, with a fake passport, and the nanochip would respond in a flash, killing its host.

Because legal attempts to apply for a visa were answered with a direct warning notice, lawbreakers were accorded no considerations, and no second chances. If the unwary traveler wished to leave whatever disgraceful things happened in Midas back in Midas and go on with his peaceful, uneventful life, then he was advised to never return there again.

Which was why those who chose to deliberately become refugees kept their distance from the Midas Division of Public Safety, and disguised themselves as slum mongrels. The ghost city of Ceres was beyond the reach of Midas law.

However, no matter how good the disguise, being guaranteed a quiet existence there was a completely different matter. Life had an

altogether different value, and the changes to one's environment were as different as night and day. The slums were a law unto themselves. Those who couldn't acclimate to that fact would get squeezed out as a matter of course.

"As far as we're concerned, sinkers and slum mongrels are litter from the same dumpster. The leech cuddling up to the cockroach to drain each other dry."

"A sinker trying to pass as a mongrel and a Blondy pet in the slums are two completely different problems," Gayle stated, the implications ringing clear in his voice.

"Gayle, you aren't trying to say that this thing's being raised as a Blondy sleeper, are you?" Marcus asked, making Jayd and the others freeze, their mouths and eyes wide open. They couldn't have ever imagined those words coming from Marcus's mouth.

A sleeper. Code word for a special-duty cop working undercover. Who they were, how many there were, and their official assignments and personal histories were all listed as top-secret. Nothing about them was ever more than rumor and speculation, because no one person in the Midas Division of Public Safety knew the whole story.

But nobody could deny their existence. Even the Darkmen—the self-acknowledged elite of Midas law enforcement—saw important intel arising in sectors they were not involved in, setting critical events into motion with seemingly miraculous timing.

Just the other day, there'd been a large-scale uprising in Neal Darts—a perpetually tricky territory for the regular cops—which was why it was said the sleepers operated under the direct control of Tanagura.

A slum mongrel being a Blondy pet made no sense. Neither was it reasonable that a Blondy would flaunt the law and loose a pet in the slums as if it owned the place, its records intact. But it was rational to suppose that a Blondy protégé—a sleeper—would behave like that.

From that perspective, all the perplexing pieces of the puzzle—including that punk-ass gang leader with a pair of brass ones—came together.

"I wouldn't take things that far," Gayle said, looking down, though he couldn't dismiss every troubling thought from his mind. "Still, I can't dismiss the possibility that it's all coincidence, as much of a reach as that might seem."

Gayle wasn't alone. "Lacking positive proof, it's all speculation. We're talking shades of gray. The only thing that we can nail down, here and now, is that thing's a Bloody pet."

That was what stared them in the eyes. They'd been looking for Kirie, and Riki had fallen into their laps instead. Very likely it was unrelated to the case the Darkmen were actually working on. As far as Riki was concerned, though, he still didn't know the specifics behind his reason for being detained.

Midas had its Division of Public Safety and the slums had their own law enforcement detail. And the hard and fast rule had always been that the two did not cross paths.

The slums weren't worthy even to lick the boots of Midas. So it was hardly worth the time and bother to run down slum trash and beat some sense into them. To the Darkmen, the slum mongrels deserved no more attention and concern than a bug crushed underfoot.

By then, all those theories went by the wayside. The regular beat cops weren't sent after a bunch of slum hoodlums, but the Darkmen themselves. Moreover, the slum law enforcement seemed to tacitly be along for the ride, suggesting that certain lines of communication remained open.

"Our orders were to track down and arrest a slum gangbanger named Kirie. Right now that should be our only priority."

As unwilling and disagreeable as it might be, their duty was to carry out their orders as quickly and precisely as possible. That wasn't something their chief should need to articulate, but Marcus felt compelled to lay down the law.

"Yes, sir!" Gayle answered, though the rest of the personnel in the room did not doubt that the same applied to them.

To lay any other doubts to rest, Marcus ordered them to delete all the data pertaining to G:05. But not because doubts remained about the theory that the slum mongrel was a sleeper.

"If what's in this file is true, then that kid is Blondy property. If we end up catching any flack from this, it's not going to be pretty," Marcus said, because that's what he was really worried about.

Marcus and his squad had no authority to go poking into what the pet's Blondy master was doing with him. Marcus got to his feet to return to the interrogation room. He felt a weight on his shoulders and a sluggishness in his gait he hadn't felt when he walked into the monitoring room.

Left alone in the interrogation room, Riki's shoulders heaved as he caught his breath while his black hair lay plastered against his pale forehead.

That piece of shit Kirie. That jinx on all of them. Riki was going to pound his face in. Riki cursed him with all his might, while clenching his teeth against the pain. His sides throbbed and spasmed, and his head pounded like a drum. And yet somehow, beneath the aches and pains, his thoughts were unusually clear.

What the hell has Kirie been up to?

The Midas cops never came into the slums, let alone the Darkmen, who charged in with blood in their eyes in pursuit of Kirie's whereabouts. Something serious was going on. It wasn't a mugging gone wrong.

But Riki didn't really want to know. As long as he didn't know, he'd have nothing to say, no matter how severe a thrashing they gave him. Ignorance was the best defense against the irrational.

Riki heard the door opening and looked up. The thud of boots against concrete accompanied the return of Marcus and Jayd. He ground his teeth. *So the intermission is over?*

He couldn't begin to guess how long the abuse would go on before they called it a day. That thought was even more depressing than the pain.

Just as he had before, Marcus sat down across the table from Riki. Riki expected that Jayd would position himself again at his back. But he didn't. Compared when he'd left the room, Jayd looked positively submissive. He planted himself behind Marcus instead.

What the hell—

Within the expected weight of their twin gazes, Riki detected a different quality suffusing their attitudes.

"Seems you're some Blondy's pet," Marcus said, his voice pregnant with implications. The change in attitude suddenly became crystal clear.

Riki clenched his teeth for altogether different reasons than a few moments before. Though he'd half expected a development of that sort, having the reality thrust in his face was another thing entirely.

There was no way he could suddenly turn defiant with a *Yeah, so what of it?* attitude. The label of "pet" was to Riki nothing more than an embarrassment. The thought of anybody outside of Eos knowing the truth about him was unbearable.

"The best pick of the litter from a Midas harem would be lucky to make it to the middling ranks of Eos society. So how does a slum mongrel climb to the very top?"

There was no bitterness or sarcasm in Marcus's voice, only cold curiosity. But it still rubbed Riki the wrong way. The days and weeks bound by the chains of lust and carnality, his pride festering and rotting away—to call *that* climbing to the top—he'd trade places with anyone in a heartbeat. So when Marcus said, "You can go," Riki didn't comprehend what he was saying at first.

You can go. Riki turned the words over in his mind. He furrowed his brow. And at last he understood. He was free to leave.

But why? Because he was a Blondy's pet, that was why. Nothing else

could explain the Darkmen's sudden change of attitude.

So that's what it comes down to.

Riki briefly uttered a silent prayer even as he tasted the bitter bile at the corners of his mouth.

What's a Blondy pet doing in the slums? Marcus didn't show any eagerness to pursue that line of questioning despite the fact that up until a few minutes ago, he'd been more than willing to continue tormenting a mere slum mongrel.

The abrupt change of heart made clear that the power and influence of the Tanagura Blondies reached into even the Midas Division of Public Safety. Even though they'd been so intent on Kirie, they were letting Riki go. *Let sleeping dogs lie.* That was what it came down to. *All thanks to Iason, I guess.*

Making a display of his master's status had been the last thing on Riki's mind. But if it made the Darkmen bow and scrape, Riki wasn't about to object. Neither did he think it a gutless surrender on their part. Go nipping at the wrong heels and a man would pay for it dearly. They knew it just as well as the slum mongrels.

Despite whatever Marcus was feeling inside, he had learned from bitter experience. He wouldn't be making the same mistake Riki once had. In short, Iason had the kind of pull that could twist a Darkman's pride into knots. Though that realization was coming a bit late in the game for them, which was why they wanted Riki out as soon as possible.

Clutching his sides, Riki got slowly to his feet. But that strain alone was enough to make him groan. Dragging his feet, liable to fall over at any second, he made his way forward, clenching his teeth.

From the start, no matter how much pain Riki was in, nobody showed the slightest inclination to lend him a hand. And anybody doing so would have only pissed him off all the more.

Nevertheless, Marcus's pride as a Darkman didn't allow him to let things go just at that. Or else curiosity had won out in the end.

"Hey, kid," he called out. "Don't you want to know what that friend of yours was up to, and why he's on the run?"

Maybe Marcus simply wanted to ascertain Riki's true intentions.

Riki halted his laborious, slouching pace. "He's no friend of mine!" he growled.

There was nothing wrong with trying to get ahead in life. Every slum mongrel harbored dreams of striking it rich and getting the hell out of there. Once upon a time, so had Riki.

But there were right ways of going about it. And wrong ways. Even with Iason pulling the strings behind Riki's back, some things were impermissible, no matter what.

"That bastard is a walking death wish, I'm telling you."

Having Kirie and himself placed in the same company was one thing Riki couldn't bear. Whether Marcus believed him or not, it was the truth.

"If you really want to get your hands on Kirie, you might want to do a little homework before charging in waving those nightsticks around. Or get yourselves a few reliable informants before taking it out on us. It's not like you don't have the cash to spare. I can't believe how clueless you guys are. If you think this is the way to track down Kirie, you're a bigger bunch of dicks than I ever imagined."

Riki didn't care who was listening in. He was filled to the brim with bitter bile and he was spitting it all out. That was not the place and they were not the people at whom he should be venting all the anger stored up inside him, but he couldn't keep it contained in his gut anymore.

Marcus reacted with an arched eyebrow, while Jayd looked about ready to blow his stack. But he held his trembling, clenched fists by his side. That Jayd didn't come flying at Riki told him that his disgrace of being identified as a pet had far different implications to the Darkmen.

Having said all that was on his mind, and seeing that Marcus wasn't about to break his silence, Riki again continued to stagger along.

Giving voice to his anger hadn't calmed Riki's emotions. If anything, his heart felt all the more inflamed. A hard, heavy pain. Try as he might, he couldn't drive the image of those two Darkmen from his mind. His head throbbed in a manner apart from the ache in his sides.

It was approaching midnight and the rain continued. From the second basement level of the MPC to the lobby, Riki clung to the walls and trudged along, gasping for breath.

"You can go," was another way of saying "You're on your own." Nobody was going to escort him to the slums.

So after dragging me down here, they won't even give me a lift back. Riki and the Midas Division of Public Safety hadn't exactly gotten along, but considering all the trouble they'd put him through, the Darkmen could have at least sprung for cab fare.

Far from having enough for an air taxi, when first patted him down, he'd been relieved of his coin and cash cards. And nothing was returned. Riki could believe it was simple payback for mouthing off.

Tossed out without any money, he had no way to get home. *They really know how to fuck a guy over.*

The cold curled mercilessly around the grating pain in Riki's back. He couldn't even walk straight. His body heaved with every breath. Dragging his shoulders along the wall, thoughts of how to get home spun through his head. He had no money. The rain was coining down. He could barely walk. He was in a very bad way. He poured out curses against the Darkmen.

There was the free, twenty-four-hour tourist shuttle bus that ran through each sector. Except the MPC was far off the beaten track and no shuttle bus ran anywhere near the place. The thought of dragging his tormented body through the pouring rain made Riki wish desperately for the money to hail a cab. But that didn't mean he was about to lift a patrol car right under the noses of the MPC.

Though he was really itching to.

Turning the thought over in his mind, Riki ducked behind the wall he'd been following. Bringing out the small mobile phone he'd managed to keep on his person, he did a little research on the capsule cars circling in the vicinity of the MPC, and called one over.

These capsule cars were automatic drones utilized for routine tasks and business purposes. As cargo transports, they were plain and unappealing in appearance. As they were not used in the tourist trade, they could be directed anywhere on the map, even to places in the red zone prohibited to tourists.

Moreover, they were free.

Of course, having been erased from the official maps, Ceres could not be assigned as a destination. But close was good enough, and he'd figure things out from there. If push came to shove, it'd be a simple matter to jimmy the steering mechanism and run the thing manually at ground level.

Riki had obtained that knowledge while working under Katze as a courier. He'd been in his employ for less than a year, but Riki had learned everything he could during that time, above and below the law. Things that the Darkmen weren't even aware of.

He climbed into the capsule car and shut the door. A detailed map of Midas flashed on the small heads-up display. The map could be zoomed in and out. But without bothering to confirm the location, Riki turned to the control panel and keyed in a destination.

Area 3. Mistral Park. Genova.

Riki extracted a memory chip from a hidden pocket in his boot, inserted it into the slot on the console, and entered an access code and password. These were backdoor codes he'd obtained when working as a courier, and he wasn't sure they still worked. But thankfully they did, and for once Riki was grateful to Katze for keeping his status active.

Air taxis didn't discriminate among its passengers as long as the fee

was paid. Industrial capsule cars were different. An access code was required to divert one from its set course and designate a new destination. Without it, they wouldn't budge.

They weren't exactly user-friendly transportation. On that occasion, though, Riki was in a frame of mind to use whatever he had on hand. Doing what he had to do with an accustomed touch, Riki smiled sardonically to himself.

Boosting a capsule car with a secret security chip. Yeah, someone must have been asleep at the switch.

Back when he was working as a courier, the lessons were hammered into him by his partner Alec. "Access codes are like lover's words. Use the same over and over and they'll tire of you. They'll always know when you're coming and where to find you. The best course is to randomly choose a new code on a regular basis. In a rush or panic, there are always bound to be screw-ups. So the thing you want to keep in mind is, no matter when, no matter how big of a pain it is, always make sure the security gets top priority."

That was five years ago.

Alec was a long way behind him, and should have been forgotten by now. But in a heartbeat those old lessons came back. Alec was probably the best hacker in the black market, if not the whole star system. He'd made the chip for Riki, who had kept it hidden in his boot like a keepsake until now. Riki leaned way back in the seat. Without the slightest creak or moan, the capsule car lifted off the ground.

In the MPC monitoring room, Marcus and his underlings stared intently at the screens displaying Riki's image. After leaving through the front lobby, Riki had walked with difficulty, clinging to the wall, body heaving with each breath. The pain accompanying each hard breath was so apparent, it was almost audible. However, those occupying the monitoring room had no concern for Riki's condition.

"So, what does he do now?" Marcus asked himself as much as anybody else.

The slum mongrel had spoken his mind to the Darkmen without any fear in his eyes. Now the question of how he would make his way back to his den in the slums had everyone intrigued.

The kid could call every bluff and shoot lightening bolts with those black eyes of his, but the practicality of making a move with no money in his pocket was an entirely different matter.

Under any normal circumstances, having confirmed his identity as a Blondy pet, regardless of whatever personal motives they otherwise might be harboring, the logical course of action would have been deposit him in the slums. And that wasn't taking into account the fact that they'd roughed him up badly enough that he could barely walk on his own two feet. Yet Marcus gave him the boot without any money.

For a piece of slum trash, the kid had backbone. That was undoubtedly one suspiciously strange mongrel of a pet. Marcus wondered how the mongrel would extract himself from a sticky situation. He'd probably just collapse on the spot. Marcus wanted to see it with his own two eyes.

If he proved in the end to be all mouth and no action, Marcus wanted to see that, too. He'd wait a suitable amount of time after the kid collapsed and order somebody to drag the sorry mongrel back to the slums.

In a sense, the Riki on the monitors was a complete fool. He'd batted aside the narrow-minded opinions that the Midas Division of Public Safety held and mocked the reason and logic of the Darkmen in their stronghold.

What a strange creature. He was too clever by half. The Darkmen, with all their pride, were loath to admit that Riki would come out on top. If they could only come right out and state how they all wanted to make the little smart-ass cry, the whole thing would have gone down a lot easier.

The punk! Marcus couldn't get the thought out of his mind. And neither could he take his eyes off Riki. If Marcus had the presence of mind to admit it, the kid had him under a spell. That was the feeling that suddenly came upon him.

What manner of Blondy made a pet of a kid concealing such a sharp soul? With full knowledge of his presumptuousness, at least once he wished to behold those eyes and see for himself. Already, as those thoughts passed through Marcus's mind, Riki had retrieved his micro-mobile phone.

Jayd snorted. "Idiot. Playing with that slum toy here."

Ordinarily, the cellular systems in Ceres and Midas were incompatible with each other. More specifically, signals reaching from Midas into Ceres were jammed to the degree that no wireless communications could be picked up, further showing the extent to which Ceres was isolated from Midas. Cellular technology that worked in Ceres would be inoperable in Midas. That was why Marcus hadn't bothered confiscating it in the first place. At any rate, after manipulating the phone for a while and apparently finding it useless, Riki returned it to his pocket.

"Naïve fool," exclaimed Jayd. As if he'd been personally slapped in the face, he felt compelled to overreact to every move the kid made. The people around him couldn't help smiling. But Jayd's excessiveness and the slightly becalmed atmosphere in the room was broken by Haggard's surprised reaction. "What the hell? Chief, a cargo lifter has been diverted from sector K."

"A cargo lifter?"

"An industrial mini-cab on a routinely scheduled run."

Why would an industrial mini-cab—? Everybody thought the same thing at the same time.



"It's rendezvousing with G:05," Haggard concluded.

And there on the monitors was Riki opening the door and climbing in like he owned the thing. They all gaped and gulped at once.

What the hell is going on? The last thing they expected to see was happening right before their eyes. There was no way. *No way.* They stared in silence at the impossible reality.

"So this is what the kid meant about underestimating the slums?" Marcus couldn't be bothered to hide what was on his mind any longer.

"Put it that way, and it's not the slums, but this Riki kid," Gayle answered with a hard expression.

A slum mongrel. A Blondy pet. Probably a guy with a few other aliases besides those. Suspicions couldn't be lightly set aside, especially not watching the utterly abnormal scene unfold before them.

"No way is this the slum mongrel mind-set in action."

No mere mongrel could have made it that far or lasted that long.

"Mark my words, that kid knows his way around Midas."

Starting with Marcus, each of them was running the numbers and calculating the scenarios, trying to find a way to the bottom of the mystery.

"He's heading to Mistral Park, Genova."

By entering the vehicle registration number, that information was readily available.

"According to the map coordinates, it's the closest stopping point to the slums."

"Makes sense. Commandeer a commercial transport in order to get him within a stone's throw."

"You can't just jump into a mini-cab and fly off without a passcode."

"I came to that conclusion a while ago."

There was no way he could have flagged down a cargo lifter without the security codes in the first place.

"Gayle. Can you do a reverse trace on the codes the kid used?"

At that point, given his state of mind, Marcus figured he was in for everything.

"Yes. I've captured the codes now," Gayle said, anticipating where Marcus was going. But a moment later he blanched.

"What happened?"

"It's no good. The codes are encrypted."

Marcus sighed and drew his eyebrows together contemplatively. Among the Darkmen, Gayle's skills were on par with those of a typical computer hacker. But if he had a hard time cracking something, that was a compliment to the creator.

But why encrypt the access codes to an ordinary cargo lifter? What was the kid trying so hard to keep hidden?

Pondering that question, the lines between Marcus's eyebrows deepened. The attention of the Darkmen fixated on the monitors. They watched as the capsule car lifted lazily off the ground, fueling their misgivings further.

Chapter 6

Somewhere in the leaden darkness, a faint sound lurched toward him. The sodden, sluggish thing entwined itself about his limbs, quivering languidly, against him with its dull, heavy weight.

He didn't know if he would sink or float, be caught away in the flow, or be held still. He was conscious, but somehow nothing seemed real. It was as if his body, mind, heart and soul, had divorced themselves from each other.

Somewhere, something screamed.

He recognized the pounding sound as the pulse in his veins. In that instance, mind and body found each other again, resonating with each howl.

Near and far, like the clanging of an incessant bell, the stabbing sounds mercilessly tightened the screws in his head. The world shattered, as if viewed through a kaleidoscope's lens. His mind flashed back to flattened, two-dimensional world of black and white. Nothing made sense. Nothing stayed the same. The poisonous colors danced before his eyes, like the dots and lines of an incomprehensible hologram.

The progression of vaguely familiar signs and symbols was made up of the pieces of his memories. Or perhaps it was the delusional creation of his own neurons. Or the feverish fancy of his mind's eye run amok. A bad feeling he didn't understand. A sense of unease. An aggravating sense of urgency. A hunger.

His eyelids were so heavy they seemed glued to his eyeballs. Finally he forced them open and a bolt of pain shot out to the tips of his fingers and toes, as if a hand had grabbed his viscera and twisted.

"Mother of God—" Riki doubled over and moaned.

His back creaked like rusty hinges. His retinas throbbed. He clenched his teeth.

"*What the—*" He caught his breath. "*Damn—*"

Even lying as still as he could, the pain coursed through his nerves. The events of the night before finally began to filter into his brain. His pulse thudded noisily in his ears.

"*Shit—that—hurt—*"

His tortuous treatment at the hands of the Darkmen came back to him. He became aware of an incessant throbbing sound quite apart from the waves of agony. Grimacing, Riki raised his head.

"What?"

The sound was somebody pounding on the door. The clock on the bedside table said eight thirty-five.

What asshole... this early... in the morning...?

Cursing his visitor, bearing the pain as best he could, Riki got to his feet. The knocking on the door only became more relentless.

"*Hold on,*" he mumbled to himself. And then he suddenly remembered. Last night, after he'd made it home, he'd turned off his phone.

Sucking up all the stubbornness and willpower he possessed, dragging his bent and twisted body through the drenching rain, he'd made it back to the apartment. Dead tired, gulping for air, he'd punched in the door lock code with trembling fingers and stumbled inside.

Like an overstretched rubber band finally snapping, he'd collapsed on the spot. Still, he'd managed to lock the door and turn on the security system like he never planned on opening his door ever again. All he'd wanted to do was burrow into bed and sleep forever. So he had turned off his phone as well.

So that is what happened. It was all coming back to him now. He pressed the intercom button. There on the screen was Guy's face and all his aches and pains and sour disposition flew away. He couldn't open the door quickly enough, though it still took him an

excruciatingly long time.

Guy must have been in the same state of mind, considering whatever had driven him to all but knock down the door that early in the morning. Before the door was even wide enough, he was twisting his body through the gap.

They stared briefly at each other, neither one saying a word, frozen in place so as not to overlook a single thing.

Finally Guy spoke, instead of his usual greeting, the words trickling from his lips: "You really do look like shit first thing in the morning. What a turn-off."

Riki wanted to laugh but couldn't. As nice as it would be to resolve everything with a joke, the present reality was unalterable. Nevertheless, he was enormously relieved. His held breath slowly leaked away, making the icy hardness in his throat melt. His tunnel vision widened. In relief, his mouth relaxed from the tight, tense line.

Riki had no idea what his own face looked like. But Guy's was covered with black and blue bruises, and fresh blood still caked the corners of his mouth.

"Same to you," was all that sprang to mind. "How about the others?"

It stood to reason that the rest of the gang was in a similarly ragged condition. Thinking about it got him pissed off again. The bottled-up anger simmered inside him.

"Luke and Norris are about the same. Sid got hit with a shock eye before catching a beating and that laid him out flat," Guy said, his voice coining out in a muffled slur, thanks to a split lip.

"A shock eye?" Riki groaned, recalling the kind of jolt the thing could deliver. To the Darkmen, slum mongrels really were a lesser species, not worth much more than trash in the street.

"In fact, they were sleeping off the worst of it at Roget's until a few minutes ago."

"What?"

Roget's was the bar they frequented. Riki's thoughts spun in confusion. *If they were flat on their backs at Roget's until morning—*

Marcus, the gray-haired chief of the Darkmen had led him to believe the rest of the gang was locked up in the MPC. Was that not the case, then? He couldn't help blurting out, "You guys weren't dragged off to the MPC?"

Since being released, thoughts of what was going on with Guy and the others had been worrying Riki. His anxieties had only multiplied as time passed, feelings he simply couldn't shake. The mood at the MPC hadn't exactly been conducive to him interrogating the Darkmen about the status of his friends. When that business about Iason and him being a Blondy pet came out, it was all he could do to keep the humiliation under control. Moreover, having been beaten so badly, whatever concerns he had had for Bison, he had had no choice but to try and make it back to the slums.

But then a few minutes ago, seeing Guy's face on the monitor had made him stop and catch his breath. And when he opened the door and saw Guy in the flesh, with an enormous sense of relief, Riki saw that Guy had somehow made it back to the slums as well.

Unlike himself, for better or for worse, the rest of Bison didn't have that ace up the sleeve called Iason Mink. Riki hadn't been sure they would get released at all—and that doubt had seared the center of his brain quite apart from the physical pain.

"The Police Center?" Guy drew his eyebrows together dubiously.

"No. We were at Roget's when the Darkmen came storming in and beat the crap out of us. We've been there all night."

In other words, Marcus had fed Riki a line of pure bull. Why? For what reason? Were they looking to inflict some psychological damage? If so, then they had succeeded. Though the end product of their efforts was probably the last thing the Darkmen were hoping for.

At that juncture, though, it didn't matter. Of course, things had turned out that way only because of a turn of fate. But it was not the time to be holding any victory celebrations.

"After busting our chops, the Darkmen put the screws to the bystanders. Eventually somebody coughed up your name. Come morning, the proprietor of Roget's told us it was safe to go. At least I could walk, so I made it over here as quickly as I could."

Good to know. Riki heaved another sigh of relief. That meant he was the only one hauled off to the MPC. They'd both been dealt equal measures of irrational violence, but they hadn't been worked over or had their personal data extracted and examined. At least Riki could take the weight off his shoulders from last night.

One welcome turn of events.

While that one lucky break didn't cover the rest of the bad, knowing that the other gang members hadn't ended up on the Midas blacklist was good news.

But Riki's reaction to that information only left Guy in a more perplexed state of mind than ever. For a moment he sank into a confused silence. Then he gave Riki a sharp look.

"Riki, they dragged you down to the Police Center?" There was a hard, strained edge to his voice, his always surprisingly reliable sixth sense kicking in.

Riki wasn't sure how to respond. He hesitated, chewing on his lip. That was enough for Guy to grasp the truth.

"Why—why only you?" Guy's voice was both strained and hurt.

Riki took a deep breath and said, "I guess because I was named as the old head of the gang."

Guy answered with an unreadable expression. It stood to reason. Bison otherwise existed nowhere.

"They assumed that Kirie was a member of Bison."

A mistaken assumption, to be sure, but the Darkmen had closed their ears to the truth. As if Guy had been struck by the thought as well, his lips turned down at the corners. It probably wasn't just the Darkmen. Almost everybody else in the slums would have jumped to the same conclusion as well since Kirie had tried his best to spread the rumor. As far as Riki and the others were concerned, the issue was nothing. But it was still alive everywhere else in the slums, even if all that was left of the name Bison was a headstone over a grave, and the fame of having an unbroken winning streak at the height of their glory.

If that was all it had come down to, then they could look back on it as a good joke. Except that the ghost name of Bison was continually paraded through the slums without the knowledge or consent of original gang members. It had become for Riki and Guy something more than old news—it was a constant cause of trouble.

"But you made it back in one piece," Guy said, not trying to be funny. He was serious. The tone of his voice, the look in his eyes, betrayed a startling sincerity. Nobody made it out of the MPC looking as good as Riki did. That was a reality imprinted on the minds of every slum mongrel by the Midas Division of Public Safety.

"Because I didn't know anything about Kirie. A man can't confess what he doesn't know. No matter how many times they rough him up. If I knew, I would have spit it out long before they laid hands on me."

Riki wasn't so foolhardy as to try and spin a web of lies and take the Darkmen along for the ride. Tell one lie and every additional one after that would only compound their suspicions. He hadn't been beaten so senseless as to try a stupid dodge like that. However, there was no way he was fessing up about being a Blondy's pet to Guy.

"It's not as if I came out of there unscathed."

"Well, yeah, I can tell by looking at your face."

"That's not the half of it. They took me a few rounds, then grabbed

a bunch of my personal data."

"They what?"

"I'm on the blacklist now."

"You serious?" Guy swallowed hard.

"Yeah, I can't go flouting the law in Midas anymore."

Far from flouting the law, simply getting in and out of Midas would become much more difficult. That was what making the blacklist meant for a slum mongrel.

Back when Riki had been a courier, Katze had laid the warnings on thick: *No picking fights with the Midas Division of Public Safety*. Even when they were in the wrong, they were always right.

Bribery didn't work with them. They were a bunch of Dobermans in their devotion to the job. That was when Riki found out about that inhumane, killer nanochip as well.

The black market had its rules. And they were not compatible with the rules and regulations of the Midas Division of Public Safety.

Never forget. We've got no use for guys attracting attention to themselves. That was the gist of what Katze had told Riki the first time they met. *No need to kiss ass, but the best course of action in any case is to not cause trouble in the first place.*

That warning might have been Katze's way of openly worrying that Riki's character would stand out in the environment of the black market. In any case, Riki had a long record of turning the tables on would-be ruffians looking to give him any trouble.

If Riki let himself be taken for granted in the slums, that would be the end. Whatever was done to him was returned in full measure. That was only common sense.

But to whatever degree Katze closed his eyes to the quarrels among his employees, when it came to the work itself, that was a different matter entirely.

Your pride is absolutely irrelevant to the operations of this organization. It's all about using your head and learning from experience so you can get the job done right. The black market has no need for incompetents who can't grasp that fact.

That was the absolute and unalterable bottom line.

So when Riki was working as a courier, he never caused trouble for cops anywhere, not only in Midas but on every planet they traveled to. It wasn't Katze's good opinion he cared about, but everyone's.

That was why he never could have imagined that thanks to his entanglements with *Kirie* he would taste the humiliation of being roughed up by the Midas Division of Public Safety. He could only be grateful that the nanochip hadn't been implanted while he was in the MPC.

No, as far as the Midas Division of Public Safety was concerned, slum mongrels weren't worth even the cost of installing the thing. At the same time, merely thinking about the possibilities gave Riki the same shiver of apprehension as did the idea of the pet business with Iason being revealed.

Reacting to Riki's explosive revelation, Guy's tone of voice was as hard as Riki could have expected. "That means they'll be circulating your mug shot to the Vigilante Corps."

While working under Katze as a courier, Riki had learned the fine details of Midas society—the good and the bad. But what he had learned then was pretty much all that was known in the slums about the infamous blacklist. Or, rather, to the slum dwellers, that was the only thing worth knowing.

In any case, recently kids cruising Midas were being targeted and hunted down in increasing numbers. Rumor claimed that mug shots being leaked to the Vigilante Corps was the main cause. Whether it was fact or just bar stool chatter was anybody's guess.

The bottom line was, though nobody could say one way or the other, the fact that Vigilante Corps activity had picked up in each area—carrying out their mongrel hunts with a maddening tenacity

—was no idle rumor.

"Once the Darkmen figured they weren't going to get any useful intel out of me no matter how hard they beat me, they tossed me in the nearest dumpster and left me to die. At least that's the way it seemed to me."

"How do you figure that?"

"They picked my pockets clean. Didn't leave with a single cent. If I hadn't hidden a cash card in my boot and hailed a taxi, I would have frozen to death right there."

Ninety percent truth and ten percent lies.

Since Riki wasn't lying just to maintain a clean and consistent narrative, he let the fiction slide easily off his tongue. As long as he wished to keep his true colors hidden and his dirty laundry from getting dragged out into broad daylight, he had no other choice. He could only pray that Guy would go along with it.

"I'm just glad you made it back here safely."

"Hardly safely."

"Yeah. It's good in any case. You can't believe how relieved I was to find you here."

Coming from Guy, that was the truth. Riki took a deep breath and stared up at the ceiling. Guy let out a smaller sigh. That seemed to put an end to the conversation. But somehow they felt the strange need to keep things going.

"Hey, you eaten breakfast yet?" Riki asked, switching abruptly to a casual tone of voice. It occurred to him that they had been standing next to the door the whole time.

"What? Oh, no." Caught off guard, Guy's eyes widened a bit.

"Take a load off. I'll just be a few minutes."

"No, that's OK. I kinda left the others waiting, I'd better be heading

back."

When Guy turned to leave, Riki grabbed his arm and said more forcefully, looking him in the eye. "C'mon, sit down. At least let me warm up some soup for you."

"I guess some soup would be OK," Guy said, giving in. "My mouth is so chewed up inside," he grumbled further, "I'm not getting down anything solid."

Guy went into the living room and sat down on the sofa. Since Guy mentioned it, the same went for Riki. After last night, he didn't have much of an appetite, and wasn't really sure if he could even get anything down. But he needed a reason to keep Guy around. The only soup Riki had was some instant bouillon cubes. A full, steaming cup first thing in the morning was pretty much like drinking piss, but it was better than nothing.

They'd both been left with aching mouths, so something like warm mineral water would have been a bit gentler on the throat. But Guy would gulp it down and be on his way, and that wasn't what Riki wanted.

However forced the conversation might be, Riki wanted to talk with Guy. If they didn't talk when they could, he had the feeling that the opportunities would only grow rarer, especially after incidents like the night before.

Riki handed the cup of soup to Guy and slowly sat back on the sofa. The minute he took his mind off the matter in front of him, his sides began to ache like crazy. But having gone that far, he had to go through the motions in front of Guy.

More than drinking the soup down, they wet their lips and lapped at it like a pair of dogs. Pausing occasionally to take a breath, they slowly worked on their cooling cups.

As if to fill the silent moments, Guy said, "The Midas cops came barging right in. What the hell did Kirie do anyway?"

"If it was Kirie, he could have done just about anything," Riki

mumbled in exasperation. Kirie was the last person on the planet he wanted to talk about.

"Yeah, but it's got me worried."

The little bugger ain't worth worrying about, swore under in his head.

He gazed steadily at Guy and said, "Leave it alone, Guy. You won't do yourself or anybody else any good finding out what he's up to."

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

Whatever concerns Guy had, remaining in the dark was the better course of action. Like a sponge soaking up water, he was feeling every moment of the night before, but that sense of curiosity still throbbed inside him.

What the hell did Kirie do, and where? What domino did he tip over to set everything in motion? It had to be something that would send the Darkmen all the way into the slums to catch him.

Bison knew nothing and had nothing to give, and yet had been beaten black and blue and tossed around like rag dolls. At the end of the day, Guy still harbored a desire to know what it'd all been about. What they had suffered for.

And even if Riki wasn't harboring such thoughts, Guy had to know why Riki was dragged all the way down to the MPC. There was no way in the world he wouldn't. But Riki hadn't expected Guy to keep hammering on that nail.

"You don't want to go catching flak for that asshole," Riki blurted out. "He's dug himself in deep enough already. Don't go falling in after him."

Guy remained quiet. An uncomfortable silence rose up like an unseen wall between them. Unable to abide the frustration, Riki turned to Guy and said frankly, "Hey, Guy. Recently, it seems that even when we're hanging out together, you've been distant. What's up?"

"What's up?" Guy shifted the cup from one hand to the other and

averted his eyes.

"Hey, c'mon, don't look away from me like that."

Guy still had nothing to say.

"I can't read your mind. If you have something to say, let's hear it."

Riki hadn't intended to get on Guy's case about it. But keeping something so critical bottled up was pissing him off. His voice grew more demanding. Realizing that and biting his tongue, the silence only grew heavier.

"Last night, I thought you'd stood me up," Riki said. "I'm telling you straight, it felt like a knife in the back. You know? For the life of me, I couldn't figure out what I'd done to cool things off between us."

Riki struggled to keep his emotions in check. It hadn't been a problem with the Darkmen, but Guy was completely different. Riki didn't care about the whys—he only wanted to hear the truth from Guy's mouth.

"C'mon, Guy. Give me a break. I'm begging you." Tears sprang unexpectedly to his eyes. "I know I jerked you around in the past. But no matter what, whenever I looked behind me, you were always there. I can't stand getting the cold shoulder from you all of a sudden."

It'd been that way ever since their time at Guardian. Whenever Riki turned around, Guy was there behind him. That was why Riki could keep his eyes focused forward.

Even when Riki quit as leader of Bison and left it behind, he could feel Guy's warmth at his shoulder. Now all he saw were ditches lurking beneath tall grass.

Despite their mutually hammered conditions, when they looked into each other's faces and exchanged words, Riki couldn't shake the feeling of something being buried between them. And though becoming aware of it, that impassable wall still blocked the way. He hated it. He wanted it to end.

"Spit it out. What about me is getting under your skin?"

"That's not it, Riki," Guy stated succinctly. "You've got it wrong." His words cut like a scalpel. "Is this because you want to pair up again?"

For a moment, Riki held his breath. More than not seeing it coming, the overwhelming immediacy of the proposition froze the look on his face so that his lips felt numbed by cold.

"A joke. I was joking." Guy smiled broadly. "You're taking it way too seriously. Don't worry," he laughed.

Riki had nothing to say in response to such forced formalities and instead lowered his eyes.

Don't worry, he thought, repeating Guy's words to himself. *Sorry*.

It was utterly pointless.

I'm sorry.

There was no way he could.

My fault.

In a matter of days, he would be gone from that life. *I'm sorry. Sorry for getting you caught up in all of this*.

He wanted to tell Guy everything, but couldn't. He wanted to talk. He wanted to confess. But he hated having his faults exposed. He hated being prodded, cross-examined, put under the microscope. Revealing what was truly in his heart was the most frightening thing of all.

Just spit it out.

That was his line, and yet he lacked the courage to do it. His own selfishness sickened him inside. He couldn't stop feeling guilty about the cavalier manner in which he was taking advantage of Guy's good nature.

"Riki, I'm taking off," Guy said in a low, hoarse voice.

Wait, Guy.

Riki rose to his feet at the same time, the image of Iason's face flickering across the back of his mind and rendering his movement stiff and awkward.

It's fine. Don't sweat it.

You're really OK with this?

Gored on the horns of the dilemma, the tight line of Riki's lips trembled. He didn't know what to do next. Riddled with indecisiveness, his eyes faltered. Guy's back receded a step, and then another. Riki couldn't stop him, couldn't run after him. He just stood there and stared at Guy's back.

Once Guy disappeared beyond the other side of the door, all ties between them would be cut. Perhaps sensing that as well, Guy's footsteps were heavy and slow.

And so the widening fissure between them took on a physical form, as their emotions stretched tighter and tighter and seemed actually on the verge of snapping free—

A strange and unexpected scream assaulted their ears.

Riki bolted to his feet. Guy pivoted, glancing over his shoulder. For a moment, their eyes met, both sets wide with surprise. And then the next moment they looked away, searching out the source of the screams rending the morning air.

Chapter 7

It was cool and dark. No one was around. It was completely tranquil but for the occasional pilot-free cargo lifter that passed by on its scheduled route. Nothing else disturbed the strange stillness that hugged the atmosphere like a blanket.

The passageway was approximately three meters wide. Ten meters further on was an intersection, past which the corridors dissolved into a labyrinth.

It was the same to the left and right. Where were they then? How far did they need to keep going, and in what direction? Kirie couldn't decide one way or the other.

Doors and gates interrupted the walls of the passageway every few meters or so. But he couldn't spot any handles or locks or security panels.

Without the color-coded guidelines painted on the floor, his sense of direction would have abandoned him as well. And he had no idea where these color-coded lines—the trail of breadcrumbs—were leading him. There were no signs or directions. On and on he walked through this maze, with no end in sight.

How far should I take this?

Frustrated and fed up, Kirie stopped. He sighed and glanced back at Manon. But Manon only shook his head, emphasizing the point without words, his face even more placid than usual.

So what's the game plan here? The audible complaint almost breached Kirie's lips, but he held back. *Is this really the right place?*

Kirie was on the verge of posing the question out of sheer irritation. However, doing so would only further agitate the incarnation of unbending pride that was Manon. And that was the last thing Kirie wanted to do.

It wasn't easy hanging on when the goddess of luck sailed by within

grabbing distance. Mess up the timing and that chance would sail out of reach forever.

Having come this far, Kirie didn't need to suck up to Manon any more than was necessary. But he still had to be careful with his connections. When he'd sold Guy to Iason and collected his ten thousand *kario*, Kirie was sure that fate was smiling on him. But the big break he'd been waiting for never materialized. Regardless of all his well-made plans and intentions, a miss was still a miss. The realization was a numbing blow to his self-regard.

A Tanagura elite and a slum mongrel—though it was an obvious mismatch from the start, with the possibilities dangling right in front of Kirie's nose, he keenly felt the sting of his naiveté and uninformed view of the world.

Kirie had only met Iason face-to-face three times. And each time the meeting was over practically before he knew it. Though they hardly had the time to settle into a useful conversation, Iason had never put on airs or condescended to Kirie. Naturally, even without doing any of that, Kirie couldn't help but feel the pressure from being in the presence of a Tanagura Blondy.

But he didn't let himself fall into a self-loathing funk. His desire to crawl out of the slums burned too brightly for that. They called him worthless mongrel trash. But give him one good chance, and he'd leave those stifling and oppressive lower depths far behind him.

Luck, timing, and somebody to give him that necessary boost was what Kirie needed. Given that alone, he'd make something of himself in the world, slum mongrel or no slum mongrel. He was scratching and crawling up and out. As sure as he was standing there, he was grabbing onto that brass ring and holding tight. He'd taken the time and made the effort. He'd poured in the cash and held Guardian's trump card—Manon—in his hands. Nobody had given it to him. Kirie had picked this joker out of the pack all by himself. He'd come this far, and there was no going back. Retreat just wasn't in the cards.

The two of them had been following the blue line until they got to a point where the hallways split. They had one more decision to make

after that: the orange line on the right, the green line to the left, or the blue line down the center.

After a brief moment of indecision, they turned right.

It wasn't a mutual decision. Kirie left the navigation up to Manon. Not in order to salve Manon's pride, but to keep him from throwing a fit. If Kirie had insisted on leading them down this blind alley, he wouldn't have been able to stand Manon's bitching and moaning.

The harmonizing *clip-clop* of their shoes echoed louder and louder. That sound alone was the only thing softening the cool, sterile, lifeless atmosphere. More than a mere sensory illusion, the sound was strangely relaxing. Without it, all that remained was that foreboding sense of crisis.

There was nothing as far as the eye could see. Conditions just went on and on. In time, Kirie and Manon stopped hushing their breaths and bothering to hide the sound of their footsteps. It didn't matter, anyway.

After proceeding for a little while, at last they spotted the door they were looking for. They looked at each other and breathed sighs of relief, then quickened their pace.

The door was secured with an electronic lock.

"Finally hit the jackpot," Kirie said eagerly.

"Not necessarily."

"Then hurry up and get it open."

Manon extracted a cardkey from the pocket of his vest and inserted it into the slot. The door opened readily.

"Yes," Kirie couldn't help muttering to himself. "If it was going to be *this* easy... though, perhaps it was a bit *too* easy."

"What was that?"

"Oh, nothing."

Kirie's body wasn't gripped by any tense feelings. No thrill ran down his spine. He cocked his head to one side. *They really got some fucking big state secrets stashed inside here?* Cruising Midas and lifting the cash and plastic off the rich, horny old bastards was a hell of a lot more fun than what they were doing.

The door opened and they took a step inside. The interior was filled with a murky gloom. Kirie drew his eyebrows together. "What a depressing place."

The darkness made his taut nerves begin to wind again. He didn't really understand it, but the sense unpleasantness coiling around his guts seemed to be hanging in the air everywhere around him.

"Manon, where's the light switch?"

A little light would do something to diminish those uncanny feelings. At least Kirie could rid himself of the thought banging around inside his head that he was trespassing.

"Can't see a thing in all this darkness."

If they shut the door behind them, the place would be like a vault. Compared to the open hallways they'd been walking down, the place was so claustrophobic it was hard to breathe.

"You don't even have a penlight?" Kirie asked.

"What are you asking me for?"

"If I had one, I wouldn't be asking."

Instead of a biting comeback, all Kirie heard in return was a loud and exasperated sigh. But at least his eyes were gradually getting used to the light. Still, he was seeing nothing that excited his curiosity. Nothing except the expanse of space before them.

His mind remained fixated on that weird sense that had overcome him the minute he stepped into the room—and yet there really was nothing there. His expectations had been cruelly dashed. Muttering to himself, he turned his irritation on Manon.

"Manon, what kind of top-secret laboratory is this? There's nothing here. You been blowing smoke up my ass this whole time?"

Coming all that way on a fool's errand for nothing—it made Kirie want to burst out laughing. He knew better ways to waste his time.

"I never said this was any kind of a top-secret laboratory. You jumped to that conclusion all by yourself."

"What I'm saying is—"

"To start with, this is the first time I've been here."

"But we know Katze has been sniffing around. If there's smoke, there's gotta be fire if he's involved. If there's nothing here, then something doesn't add up."

"I know that. You were the one who insisted that I bring you here—a complete outsider—against my better judgment. So just zip it."

The mere mention of Katze's name immediately set Manon off. Kirie muttered sourly to himself again. *Katze sure does bring out the worst in him. I forgot how much bad blood there is between them.*

Kirie had never seen Katze in the flesh, or even an image of him. But push come to shove, what he did know was that Katze outstripped him when it came to appearances. And in any case, he was an important man in the black market.

He'd deduced that Katze had taken that lap dog of a Guardian scion—who hadn't set one foot outside its Edenic gardens—and had smacked his pride with a rolled-up newspaper. Comparing himself to a man like Katze was sheer arrogance.



"If that's the case, then let's not overstay our welcome. Let's check

somewhere else," Kirie said.

"What do you mean, somewhere else?"

"Trace back to the blue line and follow the green line instead."

For better or worse, Kirie's ability to shift himself out of emotional neutral was one of his more persistent qualities. As far as he was concerned, having come that far, he was going to discover something, if only out of sheer stubbornness. He wasn't walking away empty-handed. He had all the ambition of a self-made man, and was perfectly happy to admit it.

"I don't think somewhere else is going to be any different than here," Manon said, as he felt along the wall with his hand for a switch.

While broadcasting his contrariness with his mouth, in his heart he felt himself rising to the bait. He hated Katze so much he was willing to do anything to somehow gain the upper hand and show him up.

Both Kirie and Manon had ulterior motives of their own. They were similar in that respect, at least.

You seem to be operating under a false pretense. You and I are the same mongrel trash from the same slums. The words Katze had hurled at Manon had been laced with an unimagined scorn and fury. You are merely Judd Kuger's son. So perhaps you ought to watch your mouth.

Judd Kuger was Manon's father and the keeper of the keys of power at Guardian. Somehow, the worthless piece of furniture Katze was making Judd grovel and had insulted Manon to his face. There was no way Manon could tolerate anything like that.

Parading your grandiose sense of entitlement around only makes you an eyesore. In any case, there's no point in exchanging words with a fool who hasn't figured out that mongrel trash is and will always be mongrel trash.

The shock and humiliation and abiding indignation was more than Manon could handle. He could only resent the fact—though for completely different reasons—that Kirie had taken such a deep and profound interest in Katze, whom he considered a mortal enemy.

Upon learning from Kirie that Katze served both as the Tanagura representative and a broker in the black market, Manon was completely taken aback. He'd never heard anything like it before. His father had never mentioned the possibility.

"So that must mean there's something going on at Guardian that we don't know about. And that's what Katze has in his sights."

Manon couldn't simply laugh off the possibility. That was when the existence of these sub-level basements sprang to mind. Though he'd known about them, he had no idea what went on down there. But something had to be going on. The only people granted access were those staff members with special clearance.

In any case, as heir to the family fortune, he deserved the same access as any member of the staff. When Manon mentioned that, Kirie's eyes glittered. He wanted to know what was there and pestered Manon continuously in order to find out.

When Manon told Kirie there was no way, Kirie only grew more persistent and vengeful, and wouldn't play with him. But Manon's body hungered for that touch, so when he'd shake his head and refuse Kirie, Kirie would assault his most private and sensitive areas while his hand gripped Manon like a vice, not letting him come until he begged and pleaded and gasped for release. His endurance exhausted, the next time he said "Yes."

With that promise, Kirie paid up in advance, rewarding Manon until his loins throbbed and his brains all but melted inside his head. Kirie played Manon with his words and tongue, like an athlete who had perfected his sport.

Rejection and conciliation. Hard to get and impossible to let go. Hunger and satiation. With a single touch of Kirie's expert hands, Manon would gladly be led into hell with gritted teeth, or to heaven with the dark and quiet fury of passion.

Kirie's ambition knew no bounds. Manon couldn't shake the abiding suspicions that he was merely a pawn in Kirie's game. But knowing that, he remained in Kirie's thrall. He couldn't cut himself off from those overflowing feelings and lusts and desires.

If left to his own devices, Manon never would have dreamed of exploring the catacombs beneath Guardian. But when he was with Kirie, the guilt from breaking those prohibitions and taboos faded to a wispy nagging.

Manon wanted to know what was down there, too. And at the end of the day, the decision to visit the area became his to make, however hasty a decision it was. But if, as Kirie said, that was what Katze was aiming for, then the hastier the better.

Getting his hands on a staff ID card and making a copy was easy. After all, he was the eldest son of Guardian, Manon Sol Kuger.

Katze had insulted him to his face, but his surety about his place in Guardian remained undisturbed. Katze was a fool if he remained unaware of—if he refused to recognize—that basic reality.

But that was nothing he dared tell Kirie. No matter how Kirie coaxed and prodded, that was one stance he could not give ground on until the bitter end.

"That bastard Katze was probably just bluffing. Otherwise—" Manon started, but at that moment, his fingers brushed against something and his voice trailed off. *What's this? There's something here.*

"Bluffing? What would Katze gain by going to all that effort?"

"Shut up—"

"Huh? What?"

"Be quiet. There's something here—on the wall—" Manon concentrated his gaze and zeroed in with the tips of his fingers. He snagged something, got the feel of it, and pushed it to the right.

Almost instantly, a pale blue light flooded the darkness. A faint moving sound reached their ears. What they thought had been a

wall divided in the middle, parted to the right and left.

"Hey, you did it, Manon!" Doing a one-eighty from a few moments ago, Kirie's voice rose in an excited cry. "Let's go."

With quick footsteps, Kirie proceeded deeper into the room, Manon following on his heels. However, a moment after racing along in high spirits, their feet came to a complete halt.

"What—the—hell?" Kirie gasped.

The great expanse of space that a few minutes ago had been seemingly empty was filled with the deep blue of the ocean depths. Lining the center of the room was a row of cylinders that stretched as far as the eye could see.

And inside them were... people. No—not people—but what *used* to be people. Manon and Kirie beheld a grotesque scene the likes of which they had never seen before.

There were specimens of what might be taken as humans who were cut apart and chopped into pieces. Or even the corpses of people who, through some sudden and drastic mutation, could no longer be termed people. Or even strange and precious samples from an unknown species.

"Good God. This—is—fucking—gross—" Kirie burst out. The ominous and ghastly sight brought the remark spontaneously to his lips. But then it occurred to him that the repulsion he felt was only a visceral reaction to the sight of these body parts. Losing a foot or hand was rarely considered fatal. But a person who had his brain or internal organs removed usually died from it.

The same would be thought of a human with no bones, or a body covered with numerous, tumor-like faces, or the utterly strange mermen and mermaids, or the half-human, half-beast chimeras, looking like mistakes of nature. All of these specimens were before them.

Which was why Kirie had to tell himself that those were only

dissected humans in those tanks, specimens of their mutated parts. But if one of those floating heads connected only to a dangling brainstem were to open its eyes—

Taking it all in with his own two eyes, a moan escaped Manon's lips. In the tanks next to Kirie, inside a vivisected, headless torso connected to various wires and hoses, was a heart beating away. It was definitely alive.

And then they knew, both Kirie and Manon. The tissues residing in these tanks were not specimens or autopsied remains. Although they weren't human beings with any dignity of life left to them, *they were still living human beings.*

If Guardian was the so-called garden in Ceres, the holy precinct, unspotted and kept safe from all harm, then how could such perversions be allowed to exist? They couldn't believe it. They didn't want to believe it. They didn't want to see what they could see with their own eyes.

But they couldn't keep the truth from percolating through their brains. The grotesque scene numbed their thoughts and their limbs. Paralyzed, they stood rooted to the spot.

The fear crawled up Kirie's spine like maggots under the flesh. His hair stood on end. The desire to scream was supplanted by crippling nausea that rose up in the back of Kirie's throat. Try as he might, his body could not vomit all the fear and loathing out of him.

The stark reality ate mercilessly through their gray matter, as if attempting to devour sanity itself.

Chapter 8

A scream pierced their eardrums, like the howl of some wild animal. Shrill and hoarse and trembling in the air. Clawing out of the throat. Twitching and spasming. A cry coughing up blood.

Hiding in the closet and pasting himself against the back wall, a blanket pulled over his head, his body shaking as if in a fever, Kirie continued to shriek.

Guy and Riki stared in amazement, unable to believe their own eyes. They had to be seeing things. It had to be a figment of their imaginations.

What in the world is Kirie doing here? Why? How?

More than the shock of Kirie's manic state hammering into his field of vision, those questions sent Riki's thoughts into a white panic. Those two words twisted and turned and refracted through his benumbed mind.

Crammed into a corner of the closet, Kirie had shed his dank and dripping clothing and—from what they could see beneath the blanket—had donned Riki's instead.

That was what finally blew Riki's fuse. He saw red. *This little bastard*—had goaded Jeeks into lighting off a firestorm. *This little bastard*—had sold out Guy to Iason.

It's this fucking bastard's fault—that the MPC beat the crap out of him, rooted around in his files, revealed his status as Iason's pet, and then tossed him out on his ass to freeze to death.

These thoughts coursing through Riki's head, he felt his brains begin to boil. He'd told Kirie that if they ever crossed paths again he would kill him. The thought of Kirie's name alone was enough to make the bile rise up in Riki's throat.

And yet now, for completely different reasons, he felt the fire in his eyes. His blood burned like hot acid in his veins. Fury made the

hairs on the back of his neck stand up. His pulse beat at his temples like a bass drum. His eyes glassed over.

"Riki!" he vaguely heard Guy calling out to him. But it was like a muffled sound coming from far away. Riki ripped the blanket off Kirie's head, grabbed him by the collar, and dragged him out of the closet.

In the same instance, the cramp in his side flared up like the cold, penetrating blade of a knife. But that pain as well was extinguished by the white hot anger. He shook Kirie, causing his head to bob back and forth. But Kirie wouldn't stop screaming.

"Shut up!"

Riki kicked him in the ass as hard as he could. And somehow that pulled the plug on Kirie's yowling. His tightly shut eyes fluttered open. What visions were dancing before those odd-colored eyes of his, muddled with madness? Could he recognize reality for what it was?

Kirie whimpered, his voice pitched and shrill. "No, no—don't—stop—" He scooted backward and bawled like a baby, as if pushing away everything his eyes could see. Spittle foamed at the corners of his mouth. His already screeching voice rose further.

Riki was momentarily stunned by the extent to which the madness had displaced the overarching arrogance that was ordinarily Kirie's true nature. But there was no way it could cool Riki's towering rage. Kirie's behavior only intensified it.

With incomprehensible shrieks spilling from Kirie's lungs, he crawled away as if trying to escape. Riki planted his foot hard on Kirie's back, grabbed his ankles, and wrenched him over. When Kirie still couldn't stop struggling, Riki sat on Kirie's stomach, grabbed his hair, and slugged him in the jaw.

The crunch of bone against bone sent Kirie's blubbering into the ether. Riki, though, had doubled up his fist and cocked back his elbow for another blow when Guy grabbed his arm and shouted, "Riki! Stop it!"

"Let go! I'm going to beat the sense back into that bastard!"

"Riki, enough!"

Guy wrapped his arms around the raging Riki and dragged him off Kirie. It was the kind of thing Guy did. But no matter how much bigger a physical presence Guy had, his opponent was Riki. And getting an enraged bronco like Riki under control was no easy task.

Riki had his pride, and he wasn't a man easy to get to know. But one thing that set him apart from the rest was his high emotional boiling point. When everybody else went over the edge, he alone remained unswayed. The times when he reached his limit and cut loose were few and far between.

But between yesterday and today, the brake pads had overheated and worn thin. And with Kirie—the cause of it all—right in his face, the gloves had come off and hell was ready to break loose. At a time like that, Guy did his best to calm Riki down.

"Let go, Guy!"

"Enough already!" Guy was convinced that if he relaxed his hold, Riki really would beat Kirie to death. Though from Guy's perspective, he had plenty of reasons of his own to want Kirie dead, and giving the kid a bit of a pummeling wouldn't trouble Guy's conscience at all.

In any event, if they were still in a mood to beat Kirie soundly and string him up from the nearest lamp post, it could probably wait until after they had a better grasp of what the hell was going on.

The type who would lose a night's sleep over something like that wouldn't last a day in the slums. Retired from the gangbanging field of battle didn't mean repealing the law of the jungle that ruled the slums.

Besides, judging from Kirie's appearance, he'd gotten himself into some big trouble, and that was something Guy couldn't help getting interested in.

"What are you stopping me for?" Riki jerked his arm free and glared

at Guy, breathing heavily. "It's this bastard's fault that we both got beat up."

"I know that. But—"

Guy wasn't so much concerned about Kirie's welfare as he was about Riki losing grip of his own reason and spinning totally out of control.

"This—this piece of shit sold you out for a pocketful of cash! How can you object to giving him exactly what he deserves?"

The blood suddenly drained from Guy's face. "Riki, how—how—?"

Riki recognized his own slip of the tongue and swallowed hard. He shook his head in frustration.

"But how do you know that?" Guy stared at Riki with an inquiring yet wary expression on his face.

Riki glanced away. "He told me," he said, fingering the guilty party with his eyes. "The little shit made a point of it. How he'd sold you for ten thousand *kario*. He was prepared to do whatever it took to get out of the slums. He'd even sell his own soul."

As Riki spit the bitter words out of his mouth, the anger rekindled inside him. He really should have killed Kirie right then and there. Then the Darkmen wouldn't have come barging into the slums, knocking heads. But that was water long under the bridge by now.

Guy, hearing for the first time the truth about something he'd never imagined, just stared in amazement.

"Kirie—he said that—to you—?"

But why?

"Yeah." Riki's black eyes were filled with fury.

Awful risky thing to do.

Guy cast a sideways glance at Kirie and took a deep breath.

Pretty dumb of him.

But say that out loud, and Riki was bound to blow a fuse.

And yet you didn't thrash him within an inch of his life.

All ulterior motives aside, shooting as straight from the hip as he could, Guy knew what Riki thought of him.

No conceit. Pure conviction.

Though they weren't pairing partners, Guy didn't doubt for a moment that Riki was even now putting Guy's welfare front and center. And the opposite was not less true.

This fool really does make helping him damned difficult.

Why would Kirie go out of his way to tick Riki off like that? It was plain to anybody that Kirie fostered a sense of competition with Riki that far exceeded the norm—which Riki had stubbornly ignored from day one. Though that competitiveness gradually diminished as Kirie's *nouveau riche* pretensions escalated and the rumors spread through the slums.

The line between the winners and the losers was one that Kirie obsessed about. As the pleasures of money and newly minted status filled to overflowing the need to needle Riki should have abated accordingly.

So why?

The question rattled around inside Guy's head. It simply made no sense at all. In a way, Kirie underhandedly selling him out to the Blondy was perfect in keeping with his character.

All malice aside, Guy could get where Kirie was coming from doing something like that.

But deliberately saying something that had no business being said—with the only apparent goal of setting Riki off—was not like Kirie at all. Kirie's specialty was cajoling and sweet-talking and turning his opponents to his side. Coming to blows wouldn't serve his ends at

all. Lining up the target and taking an enemy down from a distance—that was the game he loved to play. So he'd get up close and personal, encourage that physical connection, let the cajoling pillow talk spill out—and leave the scene before things came to blows.

That Kirie hadn't once caught a knife between the ribs wasn't so much thanks to luck as to brains, and knowing when not to swim against the tide. Kirie was the unusual proof that a man could survive in the slums without relying on brawn alone.

In Kirie's case, the casual onlooker might think differently. Still, when the blood started to flow he did his level best to avoid being caught up in the melee. That was why a bunch of out-of-control gangbangers like the Jeeks bunch got under his skin so much. He wasn't pulling any punches when it came to attacking their house with that tear gas bomb. But when it came to dealing with the aftermath, well, he left that to others.

But the business with Jeeks and the business with Guy were different. No matter how much the kid might crave the limelight, taking things *that* far went way beyond bad taste. It was idiocy compounded.

However, assuming that Kirie hadn't pulled that trick on himself but on Riki, Guy probably would have taken off the kid gloves. He would have paid Kirie back with interest, and left him dead.

Guy was all too aware of the way his own mind worked. Others might see him as easygoing, a bit of a softy. But while his public image didn't draw the eye like Riki's, what it came down to was Guy just wasn't interested in anybody outside Riki's immediate sphere of influence. And if he didn't care, then he could be spared the effort of trying to keep his public and private selves separate.

His job in Bison was to back up Riki as his second in command. So he kept his eyes and ears open and made a stand with great skill when a threat presented itself. Despite knowing that going his own way made him stick out in a crowd, Guy's place was to follow

Riki's lead. He felt no need to change his ways in order to make life easier.

Guy's reputation might have turned out quite differently, because he knew he wasn't such a nice person underneath. Whatever his decision criteria, Riki was at the top. He took a certain degree of satisfaction in the fact, but that had been the unalterable reality ever since Guardian.

But then—that means—Riki must have known all along.

When Guy didn't return at once to the slums, Riki must have prepared himself for the worst. He would have been facing off against a Tanagura elite, and even he would have found that an insurmountable obstacle.

And that meant—what?

Perhaps those hickies implied an impending parting of ways. It sure seemed to Guy that it had happened before. The sense of loss was like losing his right arm—unbearable. If it couldn't be Riki, then he'd take whom he could instead. Just to have that human warmth.

Guy desperately wanted to believe that was true of Riki as well. Guy had gone missing for two weeks and Riki had apparently been beside himself with anxiety. At least, that was what Norris had told him on the sly. *He's crazy about you, Guy. In a way, you getting him out of that joint really puts you on top.*

However true that might be, Guy still didn't have a clue about what to do next. At the time, Norris hadn't stuck his nose in any more than necessary, for which Guy was sincerely thankful. Even as a joke, there was no way he could confess to being blindsided by Kirie and put under house arrest by a Blondy. Guy's pride had its limits.

The other night, though, watching Norris wrestle with his own decisions, Guy had the feeling that when it came to running with the old gang, the moment of crisis would soon be upon them.

Which side of the fence Norris—or, rather, Maxi—would come down on when the dust finally settled was a concern Guy couldn't avoid.

Kirie was the root cause of all their trouble.

Suddenly, either because Riki had hit Kirie hard enough, or because Kirie suddenly registered the pain, or because he simply couldn't hold out any longer—Kirie covered his face and began to sob. Kirie—whose pride was everything—wept softly.

The Kirie who'd screamed and wailed and twisted his body in madness before them was a grotesque sight. But that sobbing kid was so different that Guy couldn't hide his surprise.

Yet as far as Riki was concerned, far from prompting in him any feelings of sympathy, the change in Kirie's emotions only seemed to provoke and enrage him further.

"Shut the hell up!" Riki roared. "How much longer are you going to cry?"

Sensing another beating coming on, Kirie bit his lip and stifled his sobs. Compared to the stubborn pride that was his trademark, it was like he'd turned into another person. Riki's lips twisted as if choking back bitter bile.

Muffling his moans, hushing his voice, and yet continuing to snuffle, Kirie couldn't stop weeping. A deep sense of discomfort blanketed the room. Riki and Guy sat on the sofa, their eyes fixed on anywhere but Kirie.

After crying for a while, Kirie's emotions settled somewhat, the tension eased out of his limbs, and—though a long way from being relaxed—he finally managed to lie still, albeit like a broken marionette.

Noting that out of the corner of his eye, Guy straightened his posture. "Kirie, what's going on? Why would the Midas cops come charging into the slums?"

A spasm shook Kirie's body. He slowly picked himself up off the floor, and like a guilty convict being dragged off to jail, looked at Guy with timid eyes. Noting for the first time the marked contrast

between Guy's gentle tone of voice and his bruised and battered face, Kirie's eyes widened with surprise.

"It's thanks to you that we look like this," Guy said.

One glance at their faces and it was clear what kind of a beating they'd been through. And yet Kirie's expression showed that he still wondered what it had to do with him.

In that moment, Guy was the one itching to pound some sense into Kirie's thick skull. "So you thought Riki was kicking your ass just for selling me out?"

You mean, that wasn't it? The look on Kirie's face spoke louder than words.

"Hardly," Guy shot back. He wasn't in the mood to politely point out all the errors in Kirie's assumptions. "The Darkmen did this to us. They came to get you and asked us where you might be." He cut right to the chase. "We didn't know and they wouldn't listen, so they worked us over. Luke and Norris and Sid as well. Funny how I used to think we were all friends."

Kirie's face went green.

"Except we got no idea where you're hanging out these days, Kirie. Seems you're way too good for the likes of us now."

Maybe they used to hang out together, but they weren't brothers. Not by a long shot. That was clear to Guy and the other former Bison members, but not so much to everybody else in the slums.

Whatever the case might be, the old members of Bison certainly betrayed a lack of concern about Kirie's welfare that could easily be taken for disregard. But at that point, no matter what they said, people would believe whatever they wanted to believe.

"We're talking about the Darkmen, OK? If we'd known where you were, we would have told them in a second. You totaled up a debt you can't repay. We owe you nothing." Guy spoke in a soft and even voice, devoid of rough, intimidating tones. "Once they pounded on us long enough, they just ran off."

That suited the rest of them just fine. But getting beaten half to death and Riki getting hauled off to the MPC didn't mean that was the end of things. Guy couldn't begin to imagine how the whole mess was going to get resolved.

What am I telling him all this for, anyway? Kirie was the instigator of everything and yet didn't seem to have the first clue about what was going on. More than getting pissed off, Guy was simply amazed.

The whole ordeal made them no better than human punching bags. Guy wasn't going to forget it so easily. Kirie and the Darkmen aside, unless things were settled and the situation made clear, there was no going back. That was his general feeling.

To start with, what the hell was Kirie hiding out in Riki's place for? Nothing made sense and it only added to Guy's suspicions.

"W-what about you?" Kirie blurted out, staring at Guy's face. "What are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be that Blondy's pet? Did you run away" From the tone of Kirie's voice, he clearly couldn't believe that Guy was standing there in front of him.

More than being a fugitive on the run, those questions were foremost on Kirie's mind. Or perhaps he said that *because* he was on the run, and he didn't want to face the real reasons.

"You think I simply ran away? From a Blondy?"

"But—then—why—?"

"Hey, I don't have a clue myself what goes on inside the heads of those Tanagura elites."

Guy was telling the truth, but the two of them talking on like that was getting under Riki's skin. "Screw all that!" he shouted. His eyes narrowed and the anger was evident in his voice. "I don't give a damn where you've been or what you've been up to. And right now, I don't give a fuck what you've been doing in my apartment, either! Take off those clothes and get the hell out!"

As far as Riki was concerned, Kirie was dead to him. However Kirie

was involved with the Darkmen was nothing he wanted to talk about. He was committed to that stance.

Unlike Guy, who kept a lid on his raging emotions, Riki bared his fangs from the start, making no attempt to hide the fire inside. Every speck of his once unchecked pride and ambition gone, Kirie's worn and hollowed-out face only paled further.

"You're on your own, kid. Nobody's going to cover for you. Not with the Darkmen on your tail," Guy said.

Kirie knew they wouldn't cover for him—they'd draw and quarter him themselves. Guy didn't need to put things quite that starkly. Was it a tinge of sympathy for him? No. There was no point stating the obvious, not when the odds of it happening were one hundred percent.

The Midas Division of Public Safety had crossed that line in the sand and come charging into Ceres. That and the rumors of the old Bison gang getting thrashed would have made the rounds just as quickly. The astonishment and fear would be everywhere. Along with the name of the kid who had caused it all.

Kirie. He'd become a marked man, the target of all the anger and hostility in the slums. A winner—the ultimate object of envy and jealousy—in a flash descended to be the most loathed.

Kirie wouldn't be a mere beaten dog, but a despised outsider. And once that label was seared into his soul, the brand could never be removed. Even after his death, the loathing attached to his name would remain, an indelible symbol of his sins.

That was the future Kirie was doomed to. Whether he realized it or not—whether or not it had even sunk into his brain, or if he simply refused to contemplate the dire state of his existence—he would never know peace again.

With panicked eyes, Kirie looked first at Riki, and then turned to Guy. "I—I didn't do anything—"

"Give me a fucking break!" Riki exploded in anger. Kirie was still

making excuses at that stage of the game. "The Darkmen don't go chasing after people who didn't do nothing! So just get out!"

"Hold on, Riki," Guy said, trying to calm Riki down. Despite knowing the cause of Riki's fury, Guy wanted him to back off just a bit. The same way Guy always did. He didn't want Riki recklessly enraged. He wanted a different kind of mad, the Riki who was crazy, but smart.

"I don't get it, Guy. This little shit would use anybody for anything, or sell us all out if it served his purposes. I don't get what you're playing nice for!"

Riki had a point. There was little chance that the essence of Kirie's character revealed in his blatant, relentless drive to the top had changed in the slightest. And yet Guy had to say it. "There's no point beating up a coward, is there? Take a breather and cool off."

Guy had to know what Kirie had done to get the Darkmen so hot on his heels. He needed some hint, some clue. Getting knocked around for no reason at all just didn't sit right with him. Normally, he would have forgotten the whole thing, but with Kirie right there, he had to know.

Riki liked to say that knowing some things was often worse than staying in the dark. But having come face-to-face with Kirie, Guy couldn't erase the reality staring right back at him. Having taken the beating, the old Bison gang deserved to know the reasoning behind it.

Though that wasn't the way Riki saw things. He still couldn't care less about what hot water Kirie Had gotten himself into. The problem wasn't Kirie. The problem was the Darkmen coming *after* Kirie.

The Darkmen were the hounds of the Midas Division of Public Safety. Tanagura's obedient dogs. That they were bothering with someone like Kirie meant they were really slumming their services.

That made Kirie into a walking minefield. And Riki didn't want him around. The bomb might go off at any moment. Riki didn't want

Guy or the rest of Bison anywhere near Kirie when that happened. The more distance, the better.

Riki didn't have that much time left himself. As soon as his identity as a Blondy pet had been revealed to the Darkmen, that second hand had only started ticking faster and faster. What the Darkmen thought was certainly a concern, but not as worrisome as how Iason would react to the chain of events.

Riki wanted to leave at least one less regret behind. Any element inviting further disaster had to be discarded. Before his time ran out, he wanted Kirie to self-destruct and be gone from his life. That was his true desire.

"There's nothing worse than trash like you, doing whatever you want and not even cleaning up after yourself. I'll be happy to see you lying dead in the street," Riki said as his eyes narrowed to a squint. The rushing anger reached out like a mailed fist, plunging into Kirie's chest and ripping out his beating heart.

"Get out!" he shouted, fixing Kirie with a glare.

Discussion and debate were not likely to move Kirie. That he was a marked man—the one fact he couldn't bring himself to admit—was the only unalterable truth.

"Whatever you did, you're the one who's gonna answer for it. Don't try dragging others into your own shit! Go ahead and die, if that's what it takes!"

Riki's words were as good as a right hook to Kirie's chin. Kirie didn't know why Riki would go so far to shun him—why he was compelled to despise him so much—and though Kirie wasn't about to defiantly protest his innocence, Riki's complete rejection of him stung painfully.

Of course Kirie had been holding no illusions about being welcomed home as the prodigal son when he stole into Riki's apartment. He knew Riki would want to kill him and would probably carry through with the intention. He should have at least possessed that much self-reflection, and yet Riki's anger pierced his naïve resolve

like a hot blade.

What would be Kirie's next move? How could he extricate himself? Jerkily looking away, his eyes fell on Guy's excessively cool countenance. Kirie knew that the poisonous weight of Riki's presence would not be enough to render Guy speechless.

The easygoing Guy—compared to Riki—was not a shoulder to cry on, and wasn't there to catch any verbal slings and arrows on Kirie's behalf. Far from it, Guy's almost disinterested manner and occasionally barbed tones could be far more chilling and abrasive than Riki's raging temper.

Which was why, when push came to shove, Guy would throw away Kirie without the flicker of an eyelash. The thought made Kirie swallow hard.

The once legendary leader of Bison and his number two were not like the real thing and its silhouette, but kindred spirits. Kirie felt that reality as painfully as if the depths of his heart had frozen solid. The thing had trampled upon so shamelessly would bare its teeth and rear up, ready to attack at any minute. The throbbing chill ran down to the tips of his fingers and toes. And yet his throat burned like the desert. Despite all he wanted to say, the words simply wouldn't emerge.

Riki grabbed him by the collar and dragged him toward the door. "Get out!"

Kirie knew that Guy wouldn't lift a finger to help him. So in a split second, somewhere deep in Kirie's head, something broke loose. Riki's eyes, spilling over with rage, met his. The brimming black eyes of that strange species the slums had produced. Eyes that held Kirie only in the deepest contempt and disregard.

Rather than just slinking away, Kirie cast aside the last vestiges of his shame and seized Riki. "Help me, Riki. Please. Don't throw me out. I'll do anything. Help me—"

The pathetic nature of the display was something neither Riki nor Guy had expected. With Kirie's arms and legs entwined around Riki,

their bodies pressed together, Riki stared back in shock. Not willing to let the moment slip away, Kirie clung to Riki desperately. With a sharp stab of pain, Riki lost his balance and toppled over.

"*Ah shit—*" Riki winced in pain as the momentum slammed his butt and then his back against the floor. But blind to everything else, the words spilled unconstrained from Kirie's mouth.

"I love you," Kirie blurted. "I love you!" It was his last chance. The moment would never come again. "I've loved you from the start. I love you so much I can't stand it. And yet you were always so cold to me and me alone. That's why I—"





The sudden, unexpected confession rendered Riki speechless. He

forgot to groan in pain. Even Guy was flabbergasted.

"What the fuck are you saying?" Riki indignantly demanded of Kirie, who was still holding him and pestering him with his cries. But his voice was growing more shrill and hoarse.

"Let go of me!" Riki twisted his body and tried to throw Kirie off, but it only made his sides throb painfully.

"I love you. I love you—" Kirie repeated the statement over and over.

Riki tried to pry Kirie's fingers off and push him away, but the kid stuck tight. Fighting off a totally unforeseen state of panic, Riki yelled loudly, "Guy, don't just stand there! Get this bastard off me!"

Beholding a scene he couldn't have imagined in his wildest dreams, Guy could only sigh. *He's really got Riki confused. But the kid still surprised me, too.*

Kirie would take things that far? Well, apparently so. Guy was beside himself. The thought of Kirie coming there in such a disheveled state and so brazenly throwing himself at Riki—the whole thing was almost too funny to laugh off. Guy really didn't know how to react or what to say.

Finally getting Kirie off of Riki proved to be a giant pain in the ass. Perhaps convinced that once removed from Riki's side, the game would be over, Kirie clung on for dear life.

One finger, and then the next, Guy slowly pried Kirie off of Riki's back. At that point, as if his will had been exhausted, Kirie's body suddenly collapsed in a spineless heap.

Drawing in great gulps of air, Riki hauled himself to his feet, holding his sides, a sour look on his face. How he'd gotten himself drawn into the mess was a mystery to him.

Kirie's shoulders slumped dejectedly. He sat on the floor, not even bothering to lift his head. "Yeah, serves me right." He spoke in a

low, hoarse whisper. "That's what you're thinking, huh? Yeah, go ahead and laugh."

Kirie well knew his own miserable state. Crawling through that no man's land, his arms and legs losing strength, somehow, the only thing on his mind was Riki's face.

"I've been on the run, trying to find a rock someplace to crawl under, and before I knew it, these men were right on top of me. Midas cops, I figured out soon enough. They were carrying shock eyes. I thought I was going to die."

The Midas cops came through the driving rain in air cars—not the latest models like what Kirie drove, but ordinary cargo litters that blended into the background. He hadn't expected a thing until the men in military gear descended onto the streets.

Men in black who seemed to melt away into the darkness. The Darkmen. Knowing that struck Kirie dumb with horror. Standing in the pelting, freezing rain, it was as if a ball of dry ice had been shoved into his gut. He hardly allowed himself to breathe as he clung to the shadows.

Kirie didn't know why the Darkmen had invaded the Colony. But it was nothing compared to his shock when the Midas Division of Public Safety breached the borderlines of the slums as well.

He thought he was seeing things. It all had to be some sort of mistake, some bureaucratic blunder. Realizing it was no illusion and that the Darkmen were there made him sick with fear. But the Midas Division of Public Safety invading the slums made him shudder down to the marrow of his bones.

He swallowed hard and held his breath, trying to convince himself that the unbelievable scene unfolding before his eyes couldn't be real. But even then, it never occurred to him what calamities might befall Bison because of his misadventures. The thought never penetrated his mind. Even as the pressure mounted and Riki's visage rose up in his senses, it was as if the rest of Bison never existed.

Which was why, with the military-garbed Darkmen piling into the

Colony and ending up at Riki's apartment, Kirie couldn't help thinking that perhaps it was because of something *Riki* had done. It was something so serious that it had brought the Darkmen across borders that should never have been crossed.

And when Kirie thought *that*, he felt a chill run through him. Even then the pulse of his frozen heart graced madly. His weary limbs shook for reasons that had nothing to do with his exhaustion.

Kirie knew by then that the cowardly beaten dog who was Riki had once been a courier for Katze, the veritable face of the black market. Having risen above and beyond the mire of the slums, Riki's name had more force behind it than Kirie had imagined.

"Riki the Black" was what he'd come to be known as. He'd eaten, breathed, and sweat the black market. Kirie was sure that Riki had done something there that had gotten the Darkmen on his tail.

And if it was Riki, it must have been something suitably dark and shadowy. With that thought on his mind, Kirie felt the stiff line of his lips turn up at the edges.

Kirie had thought the Ceres cops were after Riki, along with the Midas Division of Public Safety. He hadn't even begun to suspect that the Darkmen—who only went after the worst criminals—were tracking him down as well.

Having raced out of Guardian to the clanging sound of the security alarms, Kirie couldn't even remember how he'd escaped from the sub-basement levels. All he had known was that he had to get out of there. Where he'd headed after that was just as fuzzy. It was like he'd gotten sucked into a black hole.

All he remembered was leaving Guardian and jumping into his air car and making for Midas. Midas at any cost. Anywhere but Ceres. The more distance he put between himself and Guardian, the better. Every additional second counted. That was the only thing on his mind.

Get out of Ceres and go underground in Midas and give the slip to Guardian security and the Ceres cops—that was his only thought.

But then he slammed his foot down on the accelerator, hit something, lost control, and plowed into the ground.

He was somewhere in Midas, but he didn't know where. He dragged his battered and bruised body away from the air car and found himself surrounded by a crowd of curious onlookers.

"You OK?" a stranger asked him.

Kirie couldn't even nod his head yes or no. The shock of crashing in a place like that and the siren of a patrol car—so much like the screaming klaxons at Guardian—threw him into a panic. His thoughts went blank. Terror gripped his body. *Get out of here! Run! Now!* shouted the voice inside his head.

Kirie bounded away, leaving all his valuables behind in the air car. He had on his person a bit of cash and some plastic. His only recourse was to head back to the slums. More than the Guardian security detail, more than the Ceres cops, he feared capture by the Midas Division of Public Safety.

A slum mongrel in Midas was worth less than trash. Get taken in by the MPC and the chances of making it out alive were slim to none.

Stealing back into the slums, the police patrols were out in numbers he'd never seen before. And he figured out soon enough that they were after him. He couldn't go home. He couldn't touch base with anybody who might rat him out. He could only hide. No matter what hole he crawled into, he couldn't sleep. He had no safe house to return to. Each impending moment made his mind shudder with fear.

In the falling rain, his enemies closing in on all sides, he realized that he'd somehow made his way to Riki's part of town.

"I saw Riki leaving with the cops. In that case—" Kirie hugged the shadows and held his breath, watching and waiting. It was his one and only chance. "I'm freezing to death here, and dead on my feet."

Once the air car carrying Riki vanished from sight, Kirie dragged himself into Riki's apartment. The Midas Darkmen had taken Riki

away. He wouldn't be returning for several days, if even then. Kirie would be safe there. Riki's place was as safe as any. Nobody would search there again. He'd finally be able to get some sleep. It'd be good to feel safe, be warm. Those were the only thoughts on Kirie's mind.

"Getting past that electronic door lock was a piece of cake," Kirie stated nonchalantly to Guy and Riki.

Riki grit his teeth. Assaulted by the Darkmen and hauled off without warning, he hadn't had time to reset the security system. And realizing that Kirie had been hiding out in his closet when he finally managed to drag his mangled body back to the apartment infuriated Riki all the more.

"But—I never expected that *you'd* be back," Kirie said callously, lifting his head and looking at Guy.

As Kirie saw things, Riki being released that same day, and Guy coming back to the slums after being sold off, and then the two of them showing up there was an unexpected turn of events.

Kirie couldn't exactly call it smooth sailing, but he had always blazed his own path, his eyes always aiming beyond the next obstacle. Stop moving and it'd all be over. Leave those desires unfulfilled and he'd never feel satisfied.

Kirie was never mistaken, never in the wrong. The goddess of luck was right there in front of him, just out of reach for the moment. That brass ring would be within his grasp soon.

But it slipped away from him, and before he knew it, he was plunging down into hell. What had he done? Where had he gone wrong? He'd slipped a gear, the flywheels had spun out of control, and he found himself on a steep slope without any brakes. It was as if for all the good luck he'd received, he finally had to pay it back, all at once.

And the ultimate proof of where everything had gone wrong had to be Guy. Kirie stared at him, eyes like a pair of lasers.

Guy flashed a wry grin. He couldn't answer the question of what in the world he was doing there, either. He didn't have a clue about what those two weeks of seclusion and confinement meant.

Wanting to know what he didn't know and wanting to understand what he couldn't comprehend were two different things.

When it came to the Tanagura elite, there was no sense trying to grasp what went on in their heads.

Kirie wasn't sure how to interpret that sardonic smile. He was sure only of the extent to which Riki consumed his mind, and rising out of that awareness, his equally consuming jealousy of Guy.

"You want to know why I sold you off?" Kirie asked.

"I know why. You wanted to get rich," Guy replied.

"Yeah. I like money. And a Tanagura elite wanted you for ten thousand *kario*. But I wanted the *connection* a whole lot more."

Except that connection hadn't paid off and chances like that were rare. So Kirie had to make his own luck. He'd sacrifice anything to get what he wanted. Or so he'd believed at the time. He'd come to realize that opportunities like that wouldn't just fall into his lap.

"The truth is, I really just wanted to see how Riki would react when he found out that *I* was the one who sold you off."

An indecipherable expression flashed across both Guy's and Riki's faces.

"I wanted to tear your existence away from his life. He only has eyes for you, and that's not right."

"You're twisted," Guy said, having no other words to describe the situation. No irony, no joke. Knowing that reaction was the product of Riki's unconditional love for Guy made Kirie's head throb all the more viciously.

"I never had a chance. Riki wouldn't look at me in that way."

Nobody contradicted Kirie. Guy knew that as far as Riki was concerned, Kirie was someone he'd been forced to take in. Kirie would never amount to anything more than an imitation. And that wasn't Guy's insight alone. Everyone thought it.

It seemed that Guy and Riki were destined to come together. But Kirie was too crafty and too arrogant to accept that he couldn't do anything about it.

"I figured that if Riki was going to hate me no matter what, he might as well hate me the most."

And Kirie was completely correct in his thoughts. No matter what Guy said, Kirie knew Guy was higher up on Riki's list. Always would be.

"Being hated from the heart is a thousand times better than being ignored. That way, I would never be far from his thoughts. I'm telling you, it's like nothing else in the world. It even beats sex."

In that moment, the full force of Riki's disgust was clearly displayed on his face. Riki looked at Kirie with true loathing. He knew that the day would never come when the hatchet would be buried between them.

Riki and Guy left Kirie behind in the living room, closed the kitchen door, and lit up a pair of cigarettes. The mood of the room left them with nothing else to do but smoke a cigarette together. They needed it, considering it was the first thing in the morning and they both looked like hell. It would have been good to chase it down with a stiff drink as well, but neither one of them made the offer.

"So, what's next?" asked Guy, breaking the silence.

"Like we have any choice?" Riki rejoined bluntly. "We kick his sorry ass out of here."

His eyes said, *Don't make me state the obvious*. He made it clear that no matter what Kirie said, it was all the same to him.

Guy didn't answer, only blew out a cloud of smoke.

"Don't you go feeling sorry for him, Guy."

"I'm not. Everybody knows that a man's got to learn to clean up after himself in the slums."

That much went without saying. Otherwise, a man might as well throw his pride in the ditch and settle for a life of being screwed out of everything he was worth. The slums did not take pity on the weak. Not everything could be straightforward and easy. Only an idiot went around shouting about his rights and expecting justice to prevail.

Yet Guy felt it necessary to point out, "Still, things right now are a bit dicey, don't you think?"

"How's that?"

"Considering everything that just went down, we need to cool off and take a longer look."

"Don't joke around. We can't leave that human time bomb lying around here."

Riki got right down to it. There was no compromising in a situation like that, no matter who was involved. The response was so typical that Guy couldn't help smiling to himself.

"In that case, maybe I should take him off your hands," Guy said, making a serious offer. He didn't doubt the extent to which Riki hated Kirie. Having heard Kirie's perverse confession, Guy would rest easier *not* leaving him there.

"No way," Riki said, a hardness in his voice and the glare returning to his eyes. "I don't want you picking up what I'm throwing away."

That was one thing Riki wouldn't bear. Taking such a hard line with Guy had to mean that he'd have no bones about ratting Kirie out to the Darkmen.

"The kid threw himself at your feet, Riki."

"You think there's something more to this?"

Something more than the money. Something more than Kirie's ambitions and desires. Maybe a jealous heart.

Riki was clearly repulsed by Kirie's words. But in all honesty, Guy couldn't figure out how he felt about it. If Kirie couldn't have Riki, then he would foster a hatred so deep the scar would remain forever on Riki's heart. And by doing that, Kirie would ensure that he'd never be forgotten. Guy never would have believed that Kirie could make his intentions so clear.

"You can't concern yourself with him after this," Riki said.

"That's why I'm trying to figure out where and how we'll get rid of him."

Guy couldn't say whether holding onto life at all costs was right or not. But Kirie throwing his pride away and clinging to Riki and saying he didn't want to die showed that Kirie still wanted to live. But if Kirie had anticipated all of it in advance, and thrown himself into Riki's arms because of it, then he was just as guilty of greed as ever.

"Desperation will bring out the worst in a man, don't you think?" Guy asked.

Riki didn't have a ready answer. Kirie was a mess and his nerves were clearly shot, but there was no way he was dumping all that shit on them in order to save himself.

Then—what was their next move?

With that thought on his mind, and a gloomy look on his face, Riki exhaled a cloud of purple smoke.

Epilogue

Earlier at Guardian.

"This—this kind of thing—not this—" Kirie heard the despondent Manon muttering. "It can't be true." His voice hoarse. "No!"

Then his throat tightened, causing his cries to grow shrill. "Not that!" he wailed in a sudden falsetto. "This can't be! Lies! All lies!" His stiff and spasmodic cries cracked and scattered.

And then a loud, cracking sound rang out as one of the cylinders shattered.

That, too, was Manon. He'd somehow come up with a metal frame chair and smashed it against the glass, sending shimmering shards in all directions. The organic fluids spilled out in a torrent, the severed hoses and wires dangling. A human head tumbled onto the floor, crushing its exposed brain stem, its eyeballs peeled and twitching, as if articulating the wordless scream of its death throes.

Manon and Kirie looked on until the red, swollen eyes looking back at them stopped moving. They couldn't tear their eyes away, as if their gazes was inexorably drawn to that spot. They stared. And stared.

And then Manon laughed. A contorted shout of mad glee tore out of his throat as he drove his boot down on the face, crushing the eyeballs like raw eggs.

A sickening, dull thud.

Kirie's legs gave way beneath him. He collapsed to the floor as Manon carried on. The shrieking laughter wouldn't stop.

Kirie threw up and crawled away, hacking. His numb limbs thrashed about. He was mired in his own vomit, squirming like a severed worm.

He stayed out of sight, day and night alike. He clung to the walls and hugged the ground and held his breath. Every approaching footstep sent him into a panic.

But his greatest fear was not hunger or thirst or the convulsions shaking his hands and feet. No, it was falling asleep, alone, and losing that grip on his senses.

Nod off for a second and he'd feel those disgusting tentacles reaching out to him from the tranquil stillness. From that ghastly, silent world where those grotesque creatures lived.

The shattered glass. The blaring, echoing klaxons. Manon's shrill, crazed laughter—

He wanted to push it all from his mind, but he couldn't forget. The nightmare made a nest inside his brain and wouldn't leave.

After his ordeal, would the night ever come when he could rest his head and stretch out his limbs and sleep?

All the hairs on his body stood on end. The blood roared in his ears.

What he had seen was too much for him to handle. But when he tried to put those images into words, the bile rose up in the back of his throat. His tongue grew thick and numb in his mouth.

Clumsily dragging his body behind him, he made it as far as Riki's closet. He tore all of Riki's clothes off the hangers and made a bed for himself on the floor. He lay down and curled up to protect himself. Kirie shoved his head into the heap of Riki's garments and slowly closed his eyes with Riki's scent all around him.

AI NO KUSABI
THE SPACE BETWEEN

Vol.6

Metamorphose

July 2009

Afterword

Hello there.

"January has come and gone. February is on the run. And March is already packing her bags."

Or so the saying goes. This year as well, the deadlines are piling up at a fair clip. Lately I find myself repeating the same admonitions all over again. And I have to say it's beginning to wear.

At any rate, that's been my life with the paperback edition of *Ai no Kusabi*, volume 5.

I was happily able to bring fully to life all of the back-story issues from when—nose to the grindstone and attention undivided until things were finally all tied up—I was doing the hardcover edition.

Call it the enjoyment of rebuilding and revising, perhaps. Though in a sense, it might better be called a guilty pleasure.

Well, last year's surprise was two earthquakes in a row. This year's big shock was my beloved computer suddenly giving up the ghost right in the middle of revising this manuscript.

No way! I screamed.

Why did it have to happen now?

I wailed and moaned before the defunct beast. But it was a relic that belonged in a museum. I should have replaced it long ago with a spanking new PC. Or at least that's what my agent had warned me to do a million times before.

But then at the worst possible time, it fizzled before my eyes. I certainly work my prized possessions hard, and I knew all along

that things simply couldn't continue as they were. So I'd tentatively purchased a new, work-only computer.

Nevertheless, the mountain of deadlines looming before me took precedence. I had to keep chipping away at them. And that meant relying on my trustworthy typing skills.

You'd think that because the keyboards on the old and new computers are so similar, there should be no real inconvenience there. Yet subtle differences exist. And those "subtleties," are a real pain at times. They can make life so difficult.

So divine punishment was finally visited upon me and my profligate ways. Having gone to great lengths to have the new computer customized according to the "Yoshihara-style" and turned into a glorified word processor, I ended up using it to do nothing more than make print-outs.

Or perhaps not so much "finally" as "inevitably." It's no exaggeration to say that with this draft of *Kusabi*, the two of us have become very well-acquainted.

Long story short, I've managed to arrive relatively unscathed at this afterword. Though definitely feeling more than a tad tired. But there's no time to lament my outcast state. It's time to buckle down and surge eagerly (or not so eagerly) onward and upward!

Well, we've come to the end of the line. Katsumi Michihara, I must apologize for all my unreliable ways and thank you deeply for all your contributions.

With that, I bid you all a fond farewell until next time.

Rieko Yoshihara

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